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Trust and Distrust in America

Many Americans think declining trust in the government and in each other makes it harder to solve key problems. They have a wealth of ideas about what's gone wrong and how to fix it

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Trust and Distrust in America

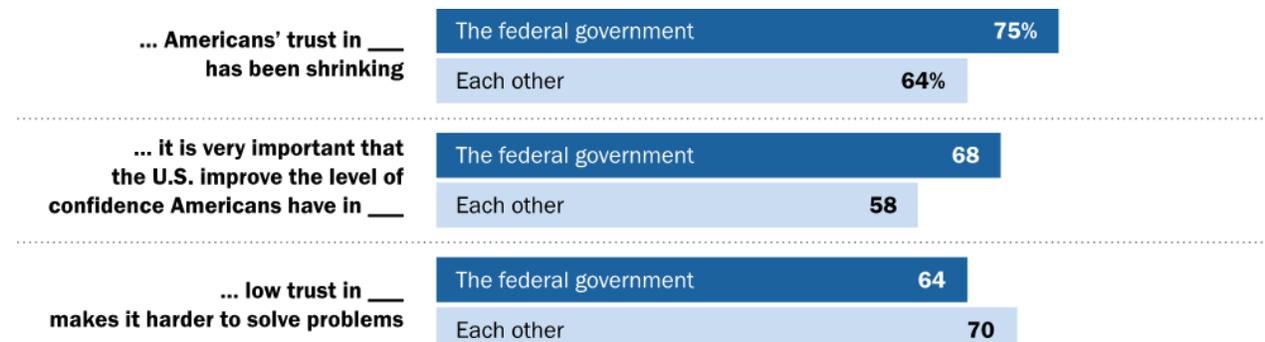
Many Americans think declining trust in the government and in each other makes it harder to solve key problems. They have a wealth of ideas about what's gone wrong and how to fix it

Trust is an essential elixir for public life and neighborly relations, and when Americans think about trust these days, they worry. Two-thirds of adults think other Americans have little or no confidence in the federal government. Majorities believe the public's confidence in the U.S. government and in each other is shrinking, and most believe a shortage of trust in government and in other citizens makes it harder to solve some of the nation's key problems.

As a result, many think it is necessary to clean up the trust environment: 68% say it is very important to repair the public's level of confidence in the federal government, and 58% say the same about improving confidence in fellow Americans.

Americans think their distrust of the federal government and each other is a problem that gets in the way of solving issues

% of U.S. adults who believe ...



Source: Survey conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.
"Trust and Distrust in America"

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Moreover, some see fading trust as a sign of cultural sickness and national decline. Some also tie it to what they perceive to be increased loneliness and excessive individualism. About half of Americans (49%) link the decline in interpersonal trust to a belief that people are not as reliable as they used to be. Many ascribe shrinking trust to a political culture they believe is broken and spawns suspicion, even cynicism, about the ability of others to distinguish fact from fiction.

In a comment typical of the views expressed by many people of different political leanings, ages and educational backgrounds, one participant in a new Pew Research Center survey said: “Many people no longer think the federal government can actually be a force for good or change in their lives. This kind of apathy and disengagement will lead to an even worse and less representative government.” Another addressed the issue of fading interpersonal trust: “As a democracy founded on the principle of E Pluribus Unum, the fact that we are divided and can’t trust sound facts means we have lost our confidence in each other.”

Even as they express doleful views about the state of trust today, many Americans believe the situation can be turned around. Fully 84% believe the level of confidence Americans have in the federal government can be improved, and 86% think improvement is possible when it comes to the confidence Americans have in each other. Among the solutions they offer in their open-ended comments: muffle political partisanship and group-centered tribalism, refocus news coverage away from insult-ridden talk shows and sensationalist stories, stop giving so much attention to digital screens and spend more time with people, and practice empathy. Some believe their neighborhoods are a key place where interpersonal trust can be rebuilt if people work together on local projects, in turn radiating trust out to other sectors of the culture.

The new survey of 10,618 U.S. adults, conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018, using the Center’s nationally representative American Trends Panel, covers a wide range of trust-related issues and adds context to debates about the state of trust and distrust in the nation. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is plus or minus 1.5 percentage points.

In addition to asking traditional questions about whether Americans have confidence in institutions and other human beings, the survey explores links between institutional trust and interpersonal trust and examines the degree to which the public thinks the nation is shackled by these issues. This research is part of the Center’s extensive and ongoing focus on issues tied to [trust, facts and democracy](#) and the interplay among them.

Here are some of the main findings.

Levels of personal trust are associated with race and ethnicity, age, education and household income. To explore these connections, we asked questions about people’s general trust or distrust in others, their sense of the exploitative tendencies or fairness of others, and their assessment of the overall helpfulness or selfishness of others. Then, we built a scale of personal trust and distributed people along a spectrum from least trusting to most trusting. About a fifth of adults (22%) display consistently trustful attitudes on these questions, and roughly a third (35%)

express consistently wary or distrustful views. Some 41% hold mixed views on core personal trust questions.¹

There are some notable demographic variations in levels of personal trust, which, even in these new contexts, follow historic trends [captured by the Center](#) and other researchers. The share of whites who show high levels of trust (27%) is twice as high as the share of blacks (13%) and Hispanics (12%). The older a person is, the more likely they are to tilt toward more trustful answers. The more education Americans have, and the greater their household income, the greater the likelihood they are high on the personal trust spectrum. Those with less income and education are markedly more likely to be low trusters.

In other words, personal trust turns out to be like many other personal attributes and goods that are arrayed unequally in society, following the same overall pattern as home ownership and wealth, for example. Americans who might feel disadvantaged are less likely to express generalized trust in other people.

Personal trust ranges across a spectrum, with differences in levels of trust tied to race and ethnicity, age, education and household income

% of U.S. adults who fall into different trust groups

	Low trusters	Medium trusters	High trusters
All adults	35%	41%	22%
White	31	41	27
Black	44	41	13
Hispanic	46	40	12
Ages 18-29	46	42	11
30-49	39	41	18
50-64	31	41	25
65+	19	40	37
High school or less	43	40	15
Some college	37	39	22
Bachelor's degree	24	46	29
Postgraduate	20	44	33
Under \$30K	45	40	13
\$30K-\$74,999	36	40	22
\$75K or more	25	44	30

Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown. The trust scale is built on questions about people's general trust or distrust in others; their sense of the exploitative tendencies or fairness of others; and their assessment of the overall helpfulness or selfishness of others. For details, see Chapter 2 subsection "People sort along a continuum of personal trust." Whites and blacks only include non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race. Source: Survey conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018. "Trust and Distrust in America"

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¹ Our classification of these different groups is explained more fully in Chapter 2.

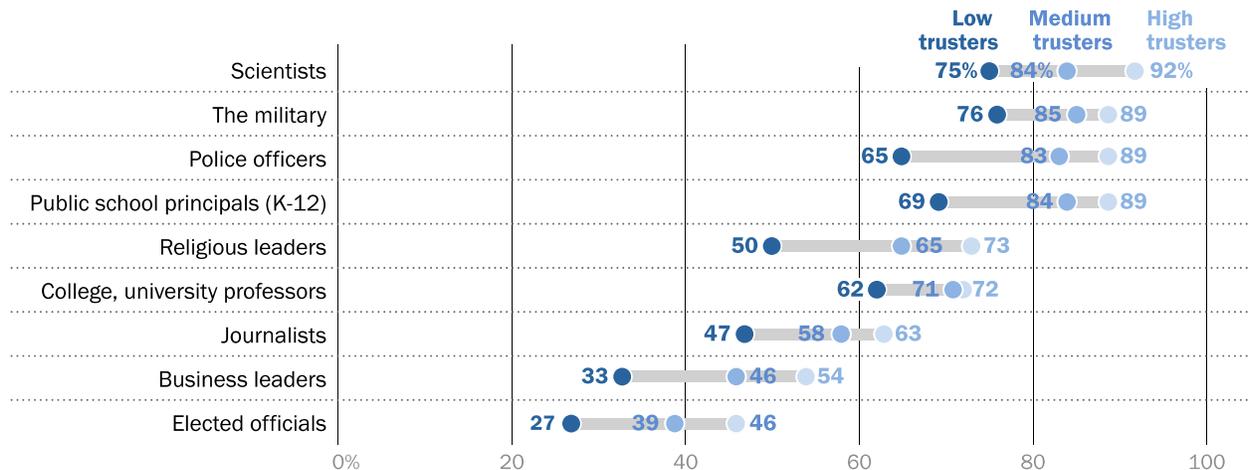
Strikingly, nearly half of young adults (46%) are in the low trust group – a significantly higher share than among older adults. Also, there are no noteworthy partisan differences in levels of personal trust: Republicans and Democrats distribute the same way across the scale.

It is worth noting, of course, that while social trust is seen as a virtue and a societal bonding agent, too much trust can be a [serious liability](#). Indiscriminate trusters [can be victimized](#) in any number of ways, so wariness and [doubt have their place](#) in a well-functioning community.

Levels of personal trust tend to be linked with people’s broader views on institutions and civic life. The disposition of U.S. adults to trust, or not to trust, each other is connected with their thinking about all manner of issues. For instance, those who are less trusting in the interpersonal sphere also tend to be less trusting of institutions, less sure their fellow citizens will act in ways that are good for civic life and less confident that trust levels can rise in the future.

Those with high personal trust have higher confidence in key leadership groups

% of U.S. adults in each group who have a great deal/fair amount of confidence that _____ will act in the best interests of the public



Note: The trust scale is built on questions about people’s general trust or distrust in others; their sense of the exploitative tendencies or fairness of others; and their assessment of the overall helpfulness or selfishness of others. For details, see Chapter 2 subsection “People sort along a continuum of personal trust.”

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.

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Also, Americans’ views on interpersonal trust provide strong clues to how they think their fellow citizens will react in a variety of civic circumstances; their confidence in groups ranging from the

military to scientists, college professors and religious leaders; and the strategies they embrace for dealing with others. For example, low trusters are much more likely than high trusters to say that skepticism is the best mindset for most situations (63% of low trusters say this vs. 33% of high trusters). They also are more likely than high trusters to say that being self-reliant is a better choice than working together with others (33% vs. 24%).

When Americans perceive that trust in the federal government has been shrinking, they are right. [Long-running surveys](#) show that public confidence in the government fell precipitously in the 1960s and '70s, recovered somewhat in the '80s and early 2000s, and is near historic lows today. Although there is a widespread perception that trust in other people also has plummeted, whether that truly has happened is not as clear, partly because surveys have asked questions about personal trust less frequently or consistently.

By and large, Americans think the current low level of trust in government is justified. Just one-in-four (24%) say the federal government deserves more public confidence than it gets, while 75% say that it does *not* deserve any more public confidence than it gets. Similarly, among U.S. adults who perceive that confidence in each other has dropped, many think there is good reason for it: More than twice as many say Americans have lost confidence in each other “because people are not as reliable as they used to be” (49% support that statement) than take the opposite view, saying Americans have lost confidence in each other “even though people are as reliable as they have always been” (21% say that).

The trust landscape isn’t entirely bleak: Most Americans have confidence others will uphold key civic virtues, though not in every case. Clear majorities of Americans are confident their fellow citizens will act in a number of important pro-civic ways. This includes reporting serious local problems to authorities, obeying federal and state laws, doing what they can to help those in need and honestly reporting their income when paying taxes.

However, this level of confidence does not extend across all civic activities. It seems to plunge as soon as politics enter the picture. U.S. adults render a split verdict on whether they can count on fellow Americans to accept election results regardless of who wins: 53% express “a fair amount” or “a great deal” of confidence that others will accept the results, while 47% say they have “not too much” or “no confidence at all” that others will accept the election outcome. Americans also are split on whether they can rely on others to reconsider their views after learning new information (49% have at least some confidence, 50% little or none), stay informed about important issues and events (49% vs. 51%) and respect the rights of people who are not like them (48% vs. 52%).

Moreover, in some areas Americans do *not* expect others to act in civically helpful ways. Some 58% of adults are not confident that others can hold civil conversations with people who have different views, and 57% are not confident others will cast informed votes in elections.

One notable pro-trust finding is that, at least in principle, more adults embrace collaboration than individualism. Asked about the best way to navigate life, 71% say it is better in most situations for people to work together with others, compared with 29% who say it is better to be self-reliant.

Additionally, the inclination of Americans to express different levels of trust depending on the circumstances is reflected in their views on various institutions and kinds of leaders. The military enjoys “a great deal” or “fair amount” of confidence among 83% of U.S.

Many Americans have confidence in others to do the right thing in civic life at times, but not always

% of U.S. adults who have _____ in the American people to ...

Activities where confidence is relatively high	A great/fair amount of confidence	Not too much/no confidence
Report a serious local problem to authorities when they see it	75%	24%
Obey federal and state laws	73	27
Do what they can to help those in need	69	31
Honestly report their full income when paying taxes	63	37
Work together to solve community problems	61	39
Treat others with respect	60	40

Activities where the verdict is split

Accept election results regardless of who wins	53	47
Reconsider their views after learning new information	49	50
Stay informed about important issues and events	49	51
Respect the rights of people who are not like them	48	52

Activities where people are relatively not confident

Cast informed votes in elections	43	57
Have civil conversations with people who have different views from theirs	42	58

Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.

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adults, as do scientists (83%). Not far behind are principals of K-12 public schools (80%) and police officers (78%).² Confidence in journalists stands at 55%.³

These supportive views stand in contrast to the public's overall lack of confidence in elected officials and corporate leaders: 63% express little confidence in elected officials, and 56% take a similarly skeptical view of business leaders.

Democrats and Republicans think differently about trust, but both groups wish it would rise. Although supporters of the country's two main political parties hold similar levels of personal trust, Democrats and those who lean Democratic are more likely than Republicans and Republican leaners to express worry about the state of trust in America. For example, Democratic partisans are more likely to say that trust in the federal government is shrinking (82% vs. 66%) and that low trust in the federal government makes it harder to solve many of the country's problems (70% vs. 57%).

At the same time, there is bipartisan agreement that it is important to improve trust in both the federal government and in fellow Americans, as well as that there are ways to do so.

There are some partisan differences, too, when it comes to confidence in Americans to act in some civically beneficial ways. For instance, 76% of Republicans and 63% of Democrats (including independents who lean toward each party) have confidence people would do what they can to help those in need. Similarly, 56% of Republicans and 42% of Democrats have confidence the American people respect the rights of people who are not like them.

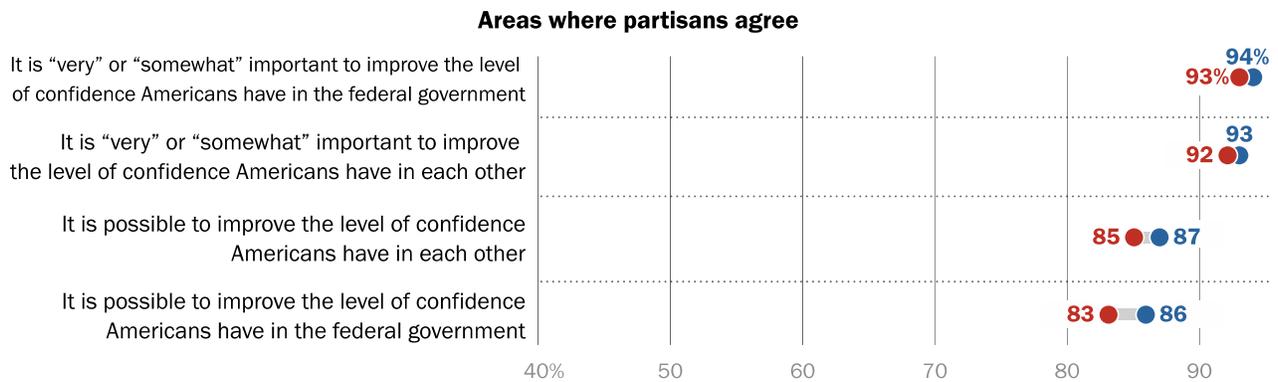
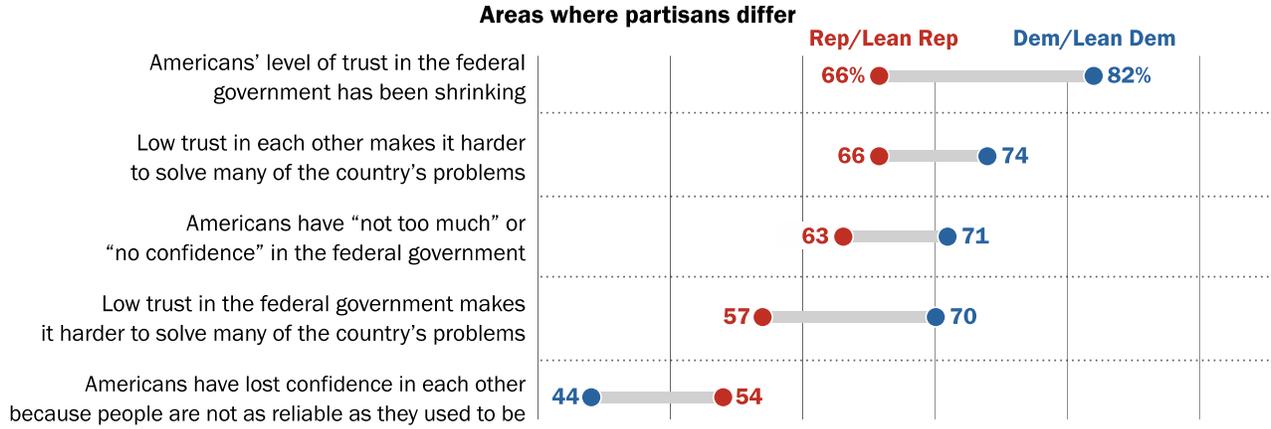
Partisan differences also show up in the levels of trust extended toward various kinds of leaders, including the military, religious leaders and business leaders (groups toward whom Republicans are more favorable than Democrats) as well as scientists, public school principals, college professors and journalists (groups that generally enjoy more confidence among Democrats than among Republicans).

² This survey asked two questions related to public school leaders: one about the public's confidence in principals and superintendents for K-12 schools, the other just about principals (not referencing superintendents). Some 77% of respondents say they have a great deal/fair amount of confidence in public school principals and superintendents. The findings cited throughout this report are from the question focused only on principals.

³ This survey asked two questions related to journalism: one about the public's confidence in journalists, the other about confidence in "the news media." Some 48% of respondents say they have a great deal/fair amount of confidence in the news media. The findings cited throughout this report are from the question about journalists.

In some key areas, Democrats tend to worry more about trust-related issues, but members in both parties agree it is important to improve the situation

% of U.S. adults in each group who believe ...



Source: Survey conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018. "Trust and Distrust in America".

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There is a generation gap in levels of trust. Young adults are much more pessimistic than older adults about some trust issues. For example, young adults are about half as hopeful as their elders when they are asked how confident they are in the American people to respect the rights of those who are not like them: About one-third (35%) of those ages 18 to 29 are confident Americans have that respect, compared with two-thirds (67%) of those 65 and older.

There is also a gap when it comes to confidence that Americans will do what they can to help others in need. More than four-in-ten young adults (44%) are confident the American people will

accept election results no matter who wins, compared with 66% of older adults who believe that’s the case.

At the same time, older Americans are more likely to believe Americans have lost confidence in each other because people are not as reliable as they used to be: 54% of those ages 65 and older take this position, compared with 44% of those 18 to 29.

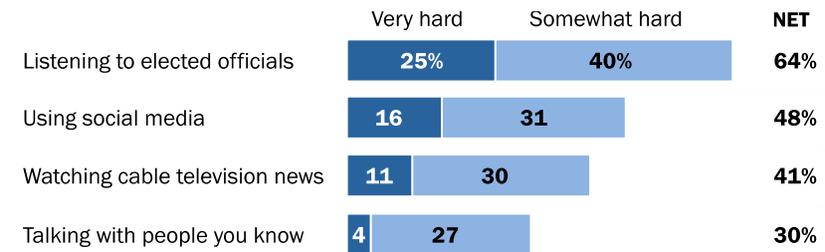
Majorities believe the federal government and news media withhold important and useful information. And notable numbers say they struggle to know what’s true or not when listening to elected officials. People’s confidence in key institutions is associated with their views about how those institutions handle important information. About two-thirds (69%) of Americans say the federal government intentionally withholds important information from the public that it could safely release, and about six-in-ten (61%) say the news media intentionally ignores stories

that are important to the public. Those who hold these views that information is being withheld are more likely than others to have greater concerns about the state of trust.

Significant shares also assert they face challenges separating the truth from false information when they are listening to elected officials and using social media. Some 64% say it is hard to tell the difference between what is true and not true when they hear elected officials; 48% say the same thing about information they encounter on social media.

Nearly two-thirds of adults find it hard to tell what’s true when elected officials speak

% of U.S. adults who say it is ___ to tell the difference between what’s true and what’s not true when ...



Note: Figures may not add up due to rounding. Respondents who gave other answers or no answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.

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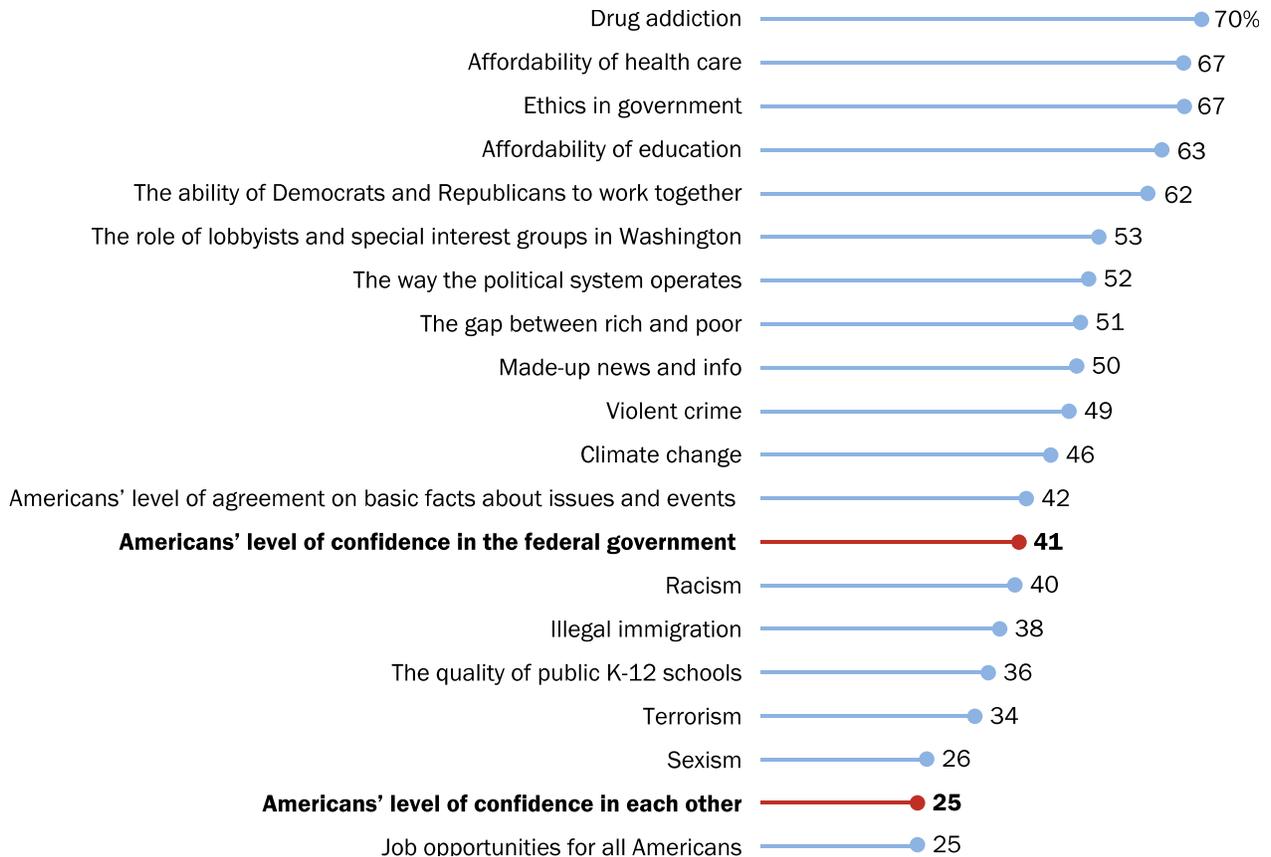
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On a grand scale of national issues, trust-related issues are not near the top of the list of Americans’ concerns. But people link distrust to the major problems they see, such as concerns about ethics in government and the role of lobbyists and special interests. The Center has asked questions in multiple surveys about how Americans judge the severity of some key issues. This poll finds that 41% of adults think the public’s level of confidence in the federal government is a “very big problem,” putting it roughly on par with their assessment

of the size of the problems caused by racism and illegal immigration – and above terrorism and sexism. Some 25% say Americans’ level of confidence in each other is a very big problem, which is low in comparison with a broad array of other issues that Americans perceive as major problems.

Americans’ confidence in government, each other are not seen as top-tier problems

% of U.S. adults who say each is a “very big problem”



Note: This material combines findings from three separate surveys. Respondents who gave other answers or no answer are not shown.
 Source: Surveys conducted Sept. 24-Oct. 7, 2018, Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018, Feb. 19-March 4, 2019.
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It is important to note, though, that some Americans see distrust as a factor inciting or amplifying other issues they consider crucial. For example, in their open-ended written answers to questions, numbers of Americans say they think there are direct connections between rising distrust and other trends they perceived as major problems, such as partisan paralysis in government, the outsize influence of lobbyists and moneyed interests, confusion arising from made-up news and

information, declining ethics in government, the intractability of immigration and climate debates, rising health care costs and a widening gap between the rich and the poor.

Many of the answers in the open-ended written responses reflect judgments similar to this one from a 38-year-old man: “Trust is the glue that binds humans together. Without it, we cooperate with one another less, and variables in our overall quality of life are affected (e.g., health and life satisfaction).”

Americans offer a range of insights about what has happened to trust, the consequences of distrust and how to repair these problems. The open-ended survey questions invited respondents to write, in their own words, why they think trust in the U.S. government and in fellow Americans has eroded, what impact rising distrust has on government performance and personal relations, and whether there are ways trust might be restored. Some of the main findings:

Why trust in the federal government has deteriorated in the past generation: Some 76% of Americans believe trust in the federal government has declined in the past 20 years. When asked what happened, the respondents to this question offer a wide range of diagnoses, some of which are more commonly cited by Republicans, others of which are Democrat-dominated. Overall, 36% cite something related to how the U.S. government is performing – whether it is doing too much, too little, the wrong things or nothing at all – including how money has corrupted it, how corporations control it and general references to “the swamp.” President Donald Trump and his administration are cited in 14% of answers, and the performance of the news media comes up in 10% of responses. Additionally, 9% of these respondents say distrust in government arises from big social forces that have swept the culture, such as rising inequality and the spread of individualism. Others mention the intractability of problems like climate change or illegal immigration, as well as increasing polarization among the public and its leaders.

Republicans and those who lean Republican are more likely than Democrats and those who lean that way to mention government performance problems and corruption (31% vs. 24%). But Democrats are more likely to cite Trump’s performance as a contributor to problems related to trust in the federal government (24% vs. 3%).

Illustrative answer: “People are jaded in this day and age. Elected officials cannot be trusted. There is a huge divide between Democrats and Republicans. Social media allows people to air dirty laundry. People are not as friendly and neighborly as they were years ago. Society has drastically changed!” Woman, 46

Why Americans' trust in each other has deteriorated in the past 20 years: Some 71% think that interpersonal trust has declined. Those who take this position were asked why, eliciting a laundry list of societal and political problems: 11% believe Americans on the whole have become more lazy, greedy and dishonest. Some 16% of respondents make a connection between what they think is poor government performance – especially gridlock in Washington – and the toll it has taken on their fellow citizens' hearts. About one-in-ten of these respondents say they blame the news media and its focus on divisive and sensational coverage.

Illustrative answer: “Cultural shift away from close-knit communities. Viewing everything through hyperpartisan political lenses. Lost the art of compromise. Empathy as well as generally attempting to understand and to help each other are all at disturbingly low levels. People are quick to attack and to vilify others, even without clear proof, solely on the basis of accusations or along partisan lines.” Man, 44

What would improve the public's level of confidence in the federal government: Some 84% of Americans believe it is possible to improve the level of confidence people have in the government. Their written responses urge various political reforms, starting with more disclosure of what the government is doing, as well as term limits and restrictions on the role of money in politics. Some 15% of those who answered this question point to a need for better political leadership, including greater honesty and cooperation among those in the political class. A small share believes confidence will rise when Trump is out of office. Additionally, some offer specific roadmaps for rebuilding trust, often starting with local community-based solutions that rise upward to regional and national levels.

Illustrative answer: “1. If members of each party would be less concerned about their power and the next election and more concerned with how they can serve their people. Term limits a possibility. 2. Rules about lobbyists/corporate money influencing politicians. 3. Importance of ethics laws and follow through for violators. 4. Promoting fact-based legislation. 5. Better relations among both parties and leaders; this is not a war.” Woman, 63

What would improve Americans' level of confidence in each other: Fully 86% believe it is possible to improve interpersonal confidence across the nation, and a number of their answers focus on how local communities can be laboratories for trust-building to confront partisan tensions and overcome tribal divisions. One-in-ten make the case that better leaders could inspire greater trust between individuals. Some suggest that a different approach to news reporting – one that emphasizes the ways people cooperate to solve problems – would have a tonic effect.

Illustrative answer: *“Get to know your local community. Take small steps towards improving daily life, even if it’s just a trash pick-up. If people feel engaged with their environment and with each other, and they can work together even in a small way, I think that builds a foundation for working together on more weighty issues.”* Woman, 32

Why Americans’ low public confidence in each other and in the federal government is a “very big” problem: Some 25% think this, and the majority of those who explain their views cite their distress over broad social issues, including the shriveling trust neighbors have in each other, the toll political partisanship and tribalism take on interpersonal relations, a rise in selfishness, or a decline in civility and moral behavior. Some mention political leaders.

Illustrative answer: *“Everything is impacted by the lack of trust – and the driver of the declining trust is the head of the federal government. Trust cannot be repaired without truth – which is in short supply.”* Woman, 56

The issues that cannot be effectively addressed because Americans do not trust the federal government: Nearly two-thirds (64%) say that low trust in the federal government makes it harder to solve many of the country’s problems. About four-in-ten of those who then give follow-up answers (39%) cite social issues topped by issues in immigration and the border, health care and insurance, racism and race relations, or guns and gun violence. Some also cite environmental issues, tax and budget matters, or political processes like voting rights and gerrymandering.

Illustrative answer: *“The *entire* general functioning of society. Trust in the federal government is low due to, in my opinion, unqualified people running it who are often dishonest. When you can’t trust elected and appointed officials, it impedes essentially everything in the government’s purview from working properly.”* Man, 30

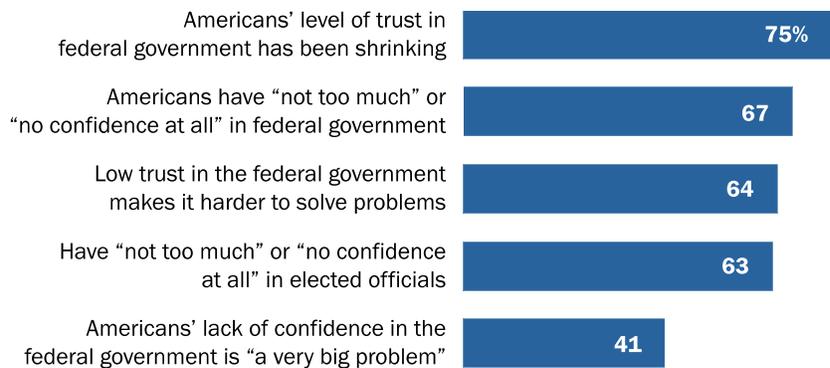
1. How Americans see problems of trust

Trust in the government and the people running it is low, and many Americans think this lack of trust is a serious problem for the country. Two-thirds of Americans perceive that the public has low confidence in the federal government, and three-quarters believe – correctly, according to [polling that dates back to the late 1950s](#) – that confidence has been shrinking over time. About four-in-ten say the public’s level of confidence in the federal government is a very big problem, and a similar share thinks it’s a moderately big problem. Although the public’s confidence in the federal government does not rank particularly high on a list of problems facing the country, nearly two-thirds of those interviewed say that the public’s low level of trust in the federal government makes it harder to solve many of the country’s problems.

Just 37% say they have at least a fair amount of confidence in elected officials to act in the best interests of the public; 63% have “not too much” or “no confidence at all.” But looking beyond elected officials, trust in other major institutions and leaders is greater. Majorities of the public say they have at least “a fair amount” of confidence in the military, scientists, public school principals, police officers, college and university professors, religious leaders and journalists.

Americans have low trust in the federal government and think that causes problems

% of U.S. adults who believe ...



Note: Respondents who gave other answers or no answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.

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Even with respect to the federal government, people’s judgments depend on exactly *which federal officials* they are asked about, suggesting that views are highly nuanced. When asked about their level of confidence in officials *appointed by the president* to oversee government agencies, only 42% of adults register at least “a fair amount” of confidence, and responses are strongly related to party affiliation. But when asked about *career government agency employees* who are not appointed by the president, about six-in-ten (61%) say they have at least a fair amount of confidence in these individuals to act in the best interests of the public. Partisanship colors these opinions as well, but not as much as with political appointees. Democrats are more likely than

Republicans to say they have confidence in career employees; Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say they have confidence in political appointees.

Most people (57%) think public confidence in the federal government has declined in recent years and don't think the government deserves more public confidence than it gets. Yet, perhaps signaling that people think confidence needs to be higher, a similar share (62%) believes that the public has too little confidence in the federal government.

Confidence in leaders and major institutions is mixed

The public is not skeptical about all institutions and leaders. In fact, most people have positive views about most of the groups asked about in this survey. More than eight-in-ten Americans (83%) say they have at least a fair amount of confidence in scientists to act in the best interests of the public, and the same percentage say this about the military. Nearly as many express confidence in school principals and police. College and university professors are viewed with confidence by 68% of those surveyed; 61% say they have at least a fair amount of confidence in religious leaders to act in the best interests of the public.

Opinion about journalists is more mixed. A small majority of the public (55%) reports having at least a fair amount of confidence in journalists. By contrast, two groups receive confidence ratings that are negative, on balance. About four-in-ten (43%) say they have at least a fair amount of confidence in business leaders, while an equal share has not too much confidence and 14% say they have no confidence in business leaders. Elected officials are at the bottom of the list, with 37% expressing at least a fair amount of confidence; 48% say they have not too much confidence and 15% express no confidence in elected officials to act in the public's best interests.

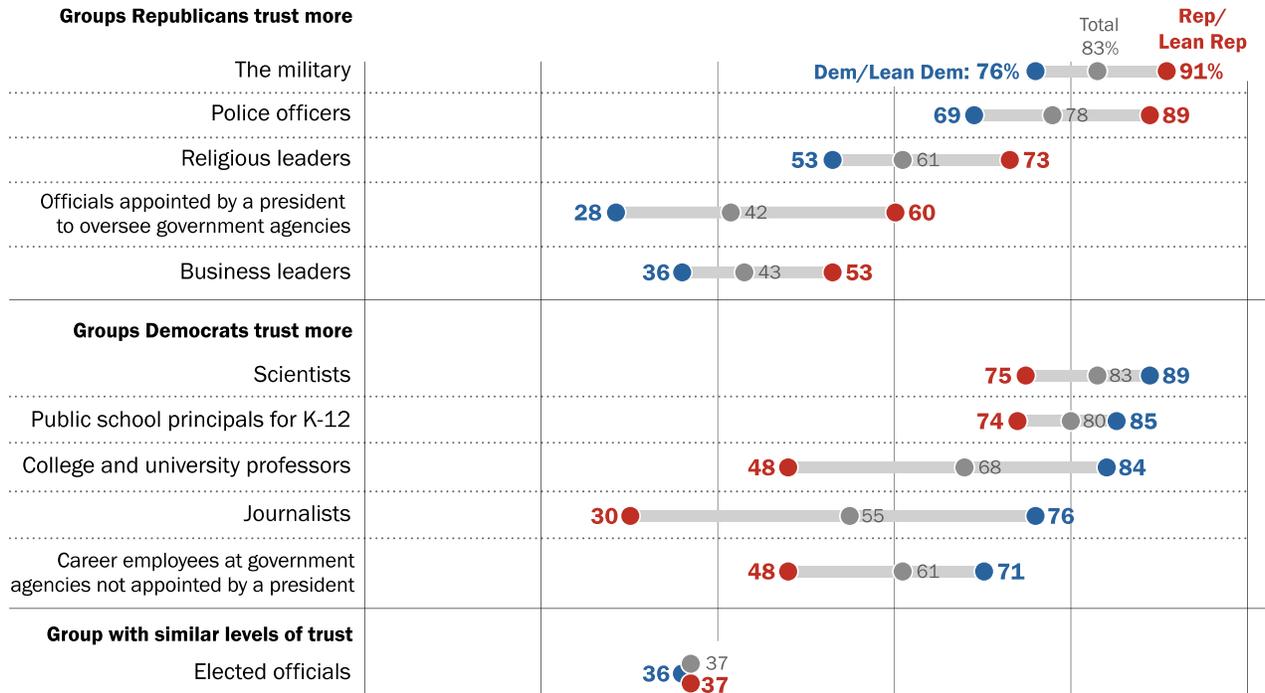
Perhaps unsurprisingly, partisanship shapes confidence in many of these institutions and leaders. But views of elected officials in general are remarkably similar across party lines: 37% of Republicans and the independents who lean Republican, compared with 36% of Democrats and Democratic leaners, express at least some confidence in elected officials. Those who identify with a party – whether Republican or Democrat – tend to be somewhat more positive than those who just lean toward a party.

Partisan differences range from 11 to 46 percentage points for all of the other institutions and leaders in the list. Views are most sharply partisan for journalists (a 46-point gap, with 30% of Republicans and 76% of Democrats expressing at least a fair amount of confidence), college professors (36-point gap, again with Republicans less favorable), and presidential appointees to executive agencies (32-point gap, this time with Republicans more favorable). Partisan gaps are

quite sizable for career agency officials (23-point gap, with Democrats more favorable), religious leaders and the police (20 points, with Republicans more positive than Democrats for both groups) and business leaders (17 points, with the same partisan pattern).

Sizable partisan divisions in public confidence in leaders and institutions

% of U.S. adults in each group with a great deal/fair amount of confidence in ...



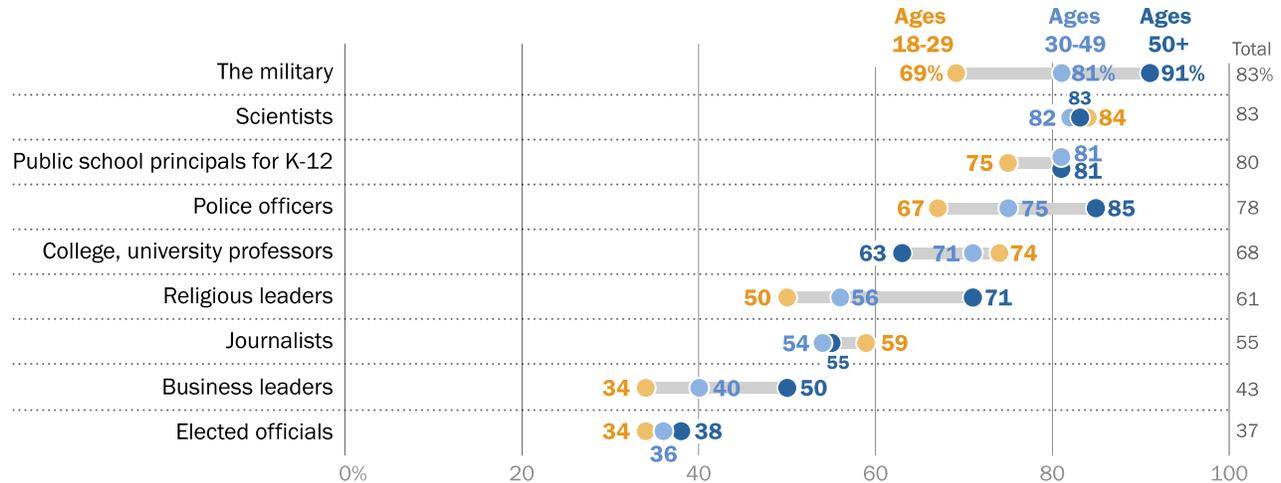
Note: Respondents who gave other answers or no answer are not shown.
 Source: Survey conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.
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Younger adults tend to express less confidence in several of these leaders and groups than do older adults. Adults under 30 are significantly less confident about the military, religious leaders, business leaders and police officers than are those 50 and older. This pattern is especially evident among Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents. Among different age cohorts of Republicans, the pattern is more mixed.

Young adults are less confident in the military, business, police, religious leaders

% of U.S. adults in each group with a great deal/fair amount of confidence in ...



Note: Respondents who gave other answers or no answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.

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Racial and ethnic differences in confidence tend to be fairly modest except in regard to journalists and the police. Blacks express much more confidence in journalists – but much less confidence in police officers – than do non-Hispanic whites. Blacks are more likely than whites to have at least a fair amount of confidence in university professors (80% vs. 64%). And among blacks in the survey, about half (52%) say they have either a fair amount (39%) or a great deal (14%) of confidence in police officers. By comparison, 85% of non-Hispanic whites express at least a fair amount of confidence in police officers, including 36% who say they have a great deal of confidence in them.

In sum, there is no generalized propensity to trust leaders. The level of trust people express depends on both who is being asked and who they are asked about. In broad strokes, similar individuals tend to trust presidential appointees, police officers, the military, religious leaders and business leaders; they express less trust in other groups they are asked about. At the same time, others tend to trust career civil servants, scientists, college and university professors, journalists, and public-school principals.

A bipartisan opinion: Confidence in the federal government has been declining

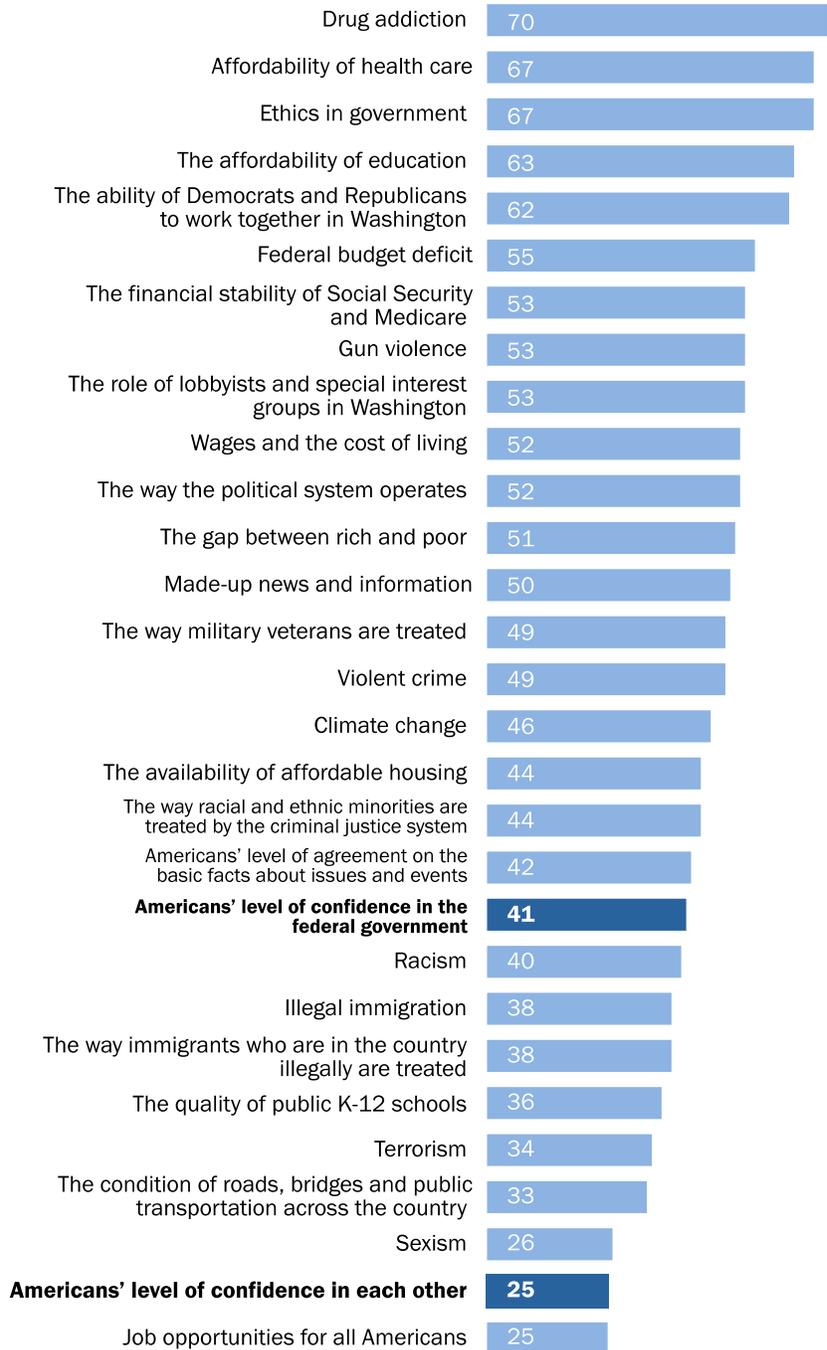
If there is a consensus view when it comes to the issue of the public’s trust and confidence in the government and in each other, it is that trust in government has been declining. Three-quarters (76%) say trust in the federal government is lower now than it was 20 years ago, while only 6% say it is higher; 17% say it’s about the same.

There is little difference between Democrats (79%) and Republicans (74%) in the view that there is less confidence in the government today. Sizable majorities of all racial and ethnic groups agree, though whites are particularly likely to feel that.

Younger adults are somewhat less likely to share this opinion, compared with older adults. But even among younger respondents, roughly two-thirds agree (69% among those under 30 vs. 84% among those 65 and older).

Confidence in government seen as lower tier problem

% of U.S. adults who say each is a “very big problem”



Source: Surveys conducted Sept. 24-Oct. 7, 2018, Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018, Feb. 19-March 4, 2019.

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Public sees confidence in the federal government as a lower-tier problem

Trust in the federal government and the people running it is clearly quite low among much of the public, and most Americans are aware that the public lacks confidence in its leadership. But is a lack of public trust itself perceived as a problem for the country? Compared with a variety of other public problems, lack of confidence in the government registers as a problem but ranks lower than notable numbers of the issues asked about. Especially when compared with substantive issues like health care, drug addiction and the affordability of education, lack of public confidence in government is seen by considerably fewer people as a very big problem (41%, compared with 67% saying this about the affordability of health care, 70% about drug addiction and 63% about the affordability of education).

But other process issues that are likely related to public trust in government are viewed as serious problems by sizable numbers of people. The issue of ethics in government is viewed as a serious problem by about as many people (67%) as drug addiction – the top issue, at 70%. And 62% say the ability of Democrats and Republicans in Washington to work together is a very big problem. About half identify “the way the political system operates” (52%) and the role of lobbyists and special interest groups in Washington (53%) as very serious problems.

Of comparable concern to confidence in the federal government was Americans’ level of agreement on the basic facts about issues and events (42%). Even though the vast majority of those surveyed (71%) said they thought Americans as a whole have become less confident in each other over the past two decades, just 25% identify Americans’ level of confidence in each other as a very big problem.

Although only a minority of the public identifies confidence in the federal government as a serious problem for the country, the share that does so is comparable to the number who identify the availability of affordable housing and illegal immigration as very big problems. And several perennial political issues are viewed as less serious than public confidence in the government, including the quality of public schools (36% say it’s a very big problem), terrorism (34%), the condition of roads, bridges and public transportation across the country (33%), sexism (26%) and job opportunities (25%).

Democrats are more likely than Republicans to view the current level of public confidence in the federal government as a big problem. Among Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents, 47% say this, while 34% of Republicans and Republican leaners do so. In general, larger shares of Democrats than Republicans find the issues asked about to be big problems, though for many items the size of the partisan gap is relatively modest. There is little difference in perceptions of

Democrats and Republicans about the extent to which the financial stability of Social Security and Medicare is a problem; there is also little partisan difference in views about the way military veterans are treated. And, notably, there is bipartisan agreement in the view that the ability of Democrats and Republicans to work together in Washington is a very big problem; 65% of Republicans say this, as do 62% of Democrats.

In general, smaller shares of younger adults express concern about many of these issues, compared with older people. For instance, a far larger share of older than younger adults perceive the role of lobbyists and special interests as a very big problem. About seven-in-ten adults 65 and older say this (71%), compared with just 36% among those under age 30. Similarly, the ability of Democrats and Republicans to work together is viewed as problematic by 73% of those 65 and older but only 47% of those under 30. Similar but less striking differences by age are seen with respect to Americans' level of confidence in the federal government, the condition of the country's infrastructure, the way military veterans are treated and the financial stability of Social Security and Medicare.

Young and old generally agree about the seriousness of some of these issues: There is little difference by age in views about the quality of the public schools, Americans' level of agreement on basic facts and the availability of affordable housing. Young people are somewhat more likely than their elders to view Americans' level of confidence in each other as a very big problem. But even among those under 30, just 31% do so.

In their own words: Americans cite a range of causes and consequences of low trust in government

To better gauge the public's thinking on these and other issues raised in the survey, groups of respondents were asked to describe, in their own words, their reasoning and concerns about various topics related to trust. To minimize the burden on any given participant in the survey, smaller groups of respondents were chosen at random to offer these open-ended responses. And offer they did.

Large majorities of those asked to respond provided at least a brief explanation to most questions, and many provided very extensive and detailed answers. For example, asked why the public is now less confident in the government than it was 20 years ago, the roughly 3,400 respondents who answered wrote nearly 75,000 words in total. These responses were read, coded and classified and will be described in this chapter and throughout this report. A selection of the responses will be included, sometimes lightly edited for punctuation, spelling and clarity, to convey some of the passion and concern expressed by the respondents.

Why is there less confidence in the federal government today than 20 years ago?

The survey's respondents who said that confidence in the federal government has declined over the past 20 years had a lot to say about why this has happened. While about three-in-ten declined to answer, those who did provided responses that ranged widely, touching on government performance, the behavior of the president and the parties, the intractability of problems, and polarization among the public and its leaders.

The most common responses dealt with government performance or lack thereof. Overall, 36% wrote something related to how the government is performing – whether it is doing too much, too little, the wrong things or nothing at all – how money has corrupted it, how corporations control it and general references to “the swamp.” While Republicans (at 41%) are more likely than Democrats (32%) to talk about government performance as a reason for the decline in trust, this is a relatively bipartisan view. And Democrats and Republicans are about equally likely to refer to polarization and gridlock as sources of public discontent (9% and 11% each, respectively).

A broad version of this complaint came from a 38-year-old woman respondent: “Politicians have been in general becoming more interested in maintaining their own power base and less interested in serving the people in the last 20 years.” Another respondent provided a litany of problems: “Problems don’t seem to get solved, no one is held accountable, and the system never changes. Look at the VA [Veterans Administration], Social Security and the way IRS is run. If these were private entities, they would have to fix their problems or go out of business. Nope, just more money get thrown in.”

The behavior and policies of Donald Trump are mentioned explicitly by 13% of respondents; not surprisingly, this is a theme articulated almost exclusively by Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents (22% vs. 3% by Republicans). Another 1% of respondents mention the Republican Party specifically. Typical of those mentioning the president was this response: “We have a

Americans believe the country is less confident in the federal government than a generation ago

76% of adults say that compared with 20 years ago Americans are less confident in the federal government

Among those, the % who say ___ is a reason Americans are less confident in the federal government

NET Government activity/inactivity	36%
General government performance, corruption, role of money	27
Polarization/gridlock	9
NET Trump and Republicans	14
Trump’s performance/behavior	13
Republicans performance	1
NET Problems with news media and information	10
News media bias/performance	5
More access to info and reporting on scandals and problems	3
Misinformation in general	1
Conservative bias in news	1
NET Social and policy problems	9
Inequality, problems of the poor	3
Broad cultural degradation	2
Tax and budget issues	1
Racism, issues tied to racial sensitivity	1
Immigration problems	1
Military issues, foreign affairs	1
Performance of schools/colleges	1
God, religion removed from public life	1
Technology, internet, social media	3
Performance of Democrats now and in the past	2
Scandals/problems from past like Watergate/Vietnam	2
Many reasons	1
General tone of politics and elections	1
Other	3
Refused/Don’t know	28

Note: Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers and up to three of them were coded.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.

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president who thinks he can do or say anything without repercussions and with a God complex. He knows nothing about foreign affairs or diplomacy and lies continuously, contradicting himself regularly. He is scary.”

Another wrote: “Donald Trump has created a government atmosphere of ‘alternative facts’ and made up information with no room for dialogue or truth. This makes it very difficult for sincere government workers to do their jobs and makes it easier for incompetent or unethical government workers to move ahead without any checks and balances. I believe that chaos is not conducive to effective government, and just creates further distrust and lack of confidence that departments are working toward the same goals for America.”

Although far more people mentioned Trump and the Republicans as culpable for the situation, some did call out the Democrats or the left, as this woman did: “I don’t recognize my country. Left wing mobs are out of control; the border is under siege; lack of morals and respect (especially our elected officials); lack of decorum and dignity during public hearings; crooks not being held accountable for their actions: CLINTON.”

Roughly equal shares of respondents mention the news media and information sources (10%) and specific policy and social issues (9%) as reasons for the decline in public trust. These topics are cited in roughly equal numbers by both Democrats and Republicans. One broad comment about the media was provided by a 55-year-old man: “Certain media personalities and companies are providing their listeners and viewers with a biased view of the world and the government. They depict everyone as having a secret agenda that is trying to manipulate the public. The hosts portray themselves as the only trustworthy source of information. The viewers then feel compelled to tune in, because they want ‘the truth.’ In the end it is those same people who are being manipulated...”

Typical of criticism of partisan news sources was this comment: “There are now more sources of targeted news that present propaganda – output intended to mold audience to adherence to a single view and prejudice it against other views – and generally false ideas including lies about the government – both people and structure – and events both here in the USA and worldwide.”

With respect to policy and social issues, respondents named a wide range of problems that they believe the government has not dealt with or has exacerbated. These include inequality and the problems of the poor (3%), cultural degradation (2%), and race, taxes, deficits, immigration, foreign affairs, education and religion (roughly 1% each).

A few other topics are mentioned by numbers of respondents, including the influence of social media (3%), scandals and problems from the past (2%) and the general tone and tenor of politics (1%).

What are the consequences of low levels of trust in the federal government?

How do Americans think about the impact of low public trust in the federal government? The survey took two different approaches to this question. One was to ask a sample of respondents who said that level of confidence in the federal government is a very big problem to explain why they thought this. The other was to pose a direct question about the impact of low trust on the country's ability to solve problems, and then to ask those who said low trust hinders the country to describe which problems they are thinking about.

Many survey respondents struggled with the more general question of how the level of confidence constitutes a problem for the country. While a large majority of those who characterized the level of trust as a very big problem provided an answer, many of those responses addressed the causes of low trust and the general condition of political polarization rather than the consequences.

But many did focus on how the public's level of confidence produces gridlock and hinders the country's ability to deal with its problems. As one respondent put it, "Confidence in the federal government helps the country work well together. We are currently fighting each other." Another wrote: "There is a lack of bipartisanship in the government. We are not working together to solve problems, rather just pointing fingers at the other party."

A related theme was that Americans' trust concerns create a downward spiral that exacerbates the condition. As one respondent put it, "Many people no longer think the federal government can actually be a force for good or change in their lives. This kind of apathy and disengagement will lead to an even worse and less representative government."

Another theme that emerged is that the public's presumed lack of confidence can lead to disorder. As one respondent put it, "No trust in government leads to violent protests, anarchy, and seems to bring out the worst in everyone. Increases the voice of conspiracy theorists."

Another said, "With the current state of the government, there is unrest in the American citizens on what is the primary focus of the government and why. Without confidence in the government it may result in civil unrest which in turn hurts our country as a whole."

Although only a 41% minority lists the public's level of confidence in the federal government as a very big problem for the country, a majority endorses the idea that the presumptive low level of trust can have negative consequences. When asked directly whether low trust in government makes it harder to solve many of the country's problems, nearly two-thirds (64%) say that it does; just 35% say the country's problems would be just as hard to solve

Those who say that the public's level of trust in government makes problems harder to solve named a wide array of the country's most vexing issues

64% of adults believe low trust in the federal government makes it harder to solve many of the country's problems

Among those, % who cite ___ as a problem that is harder to solve

NET Social issues	39%
Immigration	17
Health/medical/insurance issues	13
Racism and racial sensitive issues	6
Gun-related issues	5
Inequality, poverty, social safety net issues	4
Issues related to Social Security and entitlements	4
K-12 and college education improvements, student loans	2
Criminal justice/reform issues	2
Abortion	1
Gay rights, LGBTQ-related issues	1
Sexism/harassment issues	1
Privacy-related issues	1
NET Economic and budget issues	12
Tax policy/reform	5
Debt and deficits	4
Jobs and economic performance	1
Infrastructure	1
Climate and environment issues	10
NET Politics, elections, governance issues	6
Election reform, voting integrity	4
Corruption, role of money, gridlock	3
Issues related to Trump's performance/behavior	3
NET Foreign policy/national security issues	3
Geopolitics/international relations issues	2
Trade	1
Other	6
Refused/Don't know	42

Note: Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers and up to three of them were coded.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.

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even if trust in the federal government was higher.

Those who said that low trust makes it harder to adequately solve the country's problems were asked which issues they were thinking of; 60% mentioned at least one issue, with many offering three, four or more examples.

The issues spanned a broad array of topics, with a couple getting more attention getting more attention than others. Immigration – an issue that has defied serious congressional and presidential efforts over the past two decades to resolve – was mentioned by 17% of those asked the question. Slightly fewer (13%) mentioned an issue related to health care or health insurance. Economic topics were cited by a comparable number (12%), encompassing such issues as tax policy, the deficit, jobs and infrastructure. Climate change and the environment followed closely (mentioned by 10% of those asked). Problems with gridlock, elections, corruption, money in politics and other general governance topics were mentioned by 6% of respondents. Explicit mentions of Trump constituted 3% of answers, as did mentions of foreign policy issues including world trade and Russia's behavior.

2. The state of personal trust

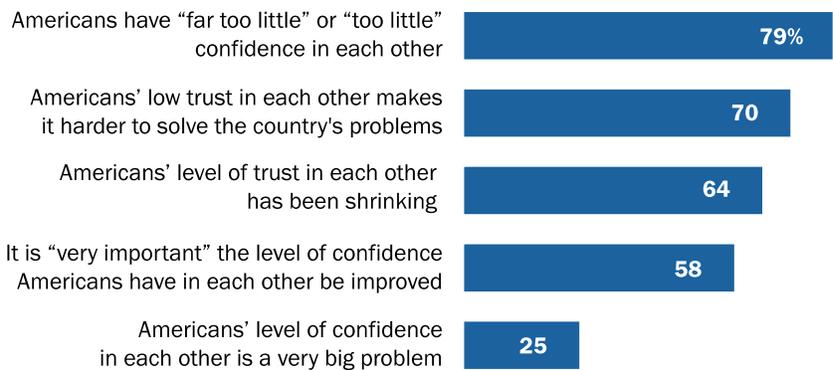
In addition to their concerns about low and declining levels of trust in government, many Americans are anxious about the level of confidence citizens have in each other. Fully 71% think interpersonal confidence has worsened in the past 20 years. And about half (49%) think a major weight dragging down such trust is that Americans are not as reliable as they used to be.

Yet there is also evidence that people worry the swing toward interpersonal distrust is an overreaction: About three-in-four Americans (79%) think their fellow citizens have too little confidence in each other. Relatedly, a fifth of adults (21%) think personal confidence in the country has worsened for little good reason. They agree with the statement that personal trust is dropping even though people are as reliable as they have always been.

Whatever is causing the problem, many Americans think it needs to be remedied. Nearly six-in-ten (58%) believe it is very important to improve the level of confidence Americans have in each other, while another 35% feel it somewhat important to find ways to restore trust.

Americans are worried about the declining level of trust citizens have in each other

% of U.S. adults who believe ...



Note: Respondents who gave other answers or no answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.

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Those who feel some urgency about the problem offer a variety of reasons why they think things have deteriorated. Among the many factors on their minds, they cite social and policy woes, such as a perception that Americans are increasingly living with loneliness and isolation, as well as the nation’s continuing struggles with race relations, crime, and religion versus secularism. They also call out others’ personal traits such as laziness, greed and dishonesty. Additionally, a share of the public thinks toxic national politics and polarization have taken their toll on the way Americans think of each other.

This chapter develops a personal trust scale according to survey respondents’ views about the risks and rewards of meeting and engaging with others. Americans sort into a spectrum of high,

medium and low trust. Their place on the spectrum is strongly tied with their views about institutions and their dispositions toward each other, their different views about the urgency of the problems linked to distrust, their beliefs about the fallout from distrust, their personal strategies for handling trust issues and their sense of how distrust impacts dimensions of national life.

Americans think several factors have weakened interpersonal confidence, starting with the tone of national politics and the media's coverage of it

About seven-in-ten Americans (71%) think people are less confident in each other than they were 20 years ago. This compares with 22% who believe Americans are as confident in each other now as they were a generation ago and 7% who think they are more confident now than then.

Why the decline? In a closed-end question, 49% of Americans say they think citizens' trust in each other has fallen because people are not as reliable as they used to be. This compares with 21% of Americans who think interpersonal trust has declined even though people are as reliable as they always have been. The view that others are less reliable than in the past is more common among those 50 and older, Republicans and those who lean Republican, those without a college degree, those living in households earning less than \$30,000 and those living in rural areas.

The 71% who believe there has been a decline in interpersonal trust were asked in an open-ended format to name any major reasons why they think interpersonal confidence has fallen over the past generation. Many cite societal and policy problems as underlying factors. In all, 43% of those who think interpersonal trust has deteriorated mention some kind of social ill as the cause of the decline in interpersonal trust. For instance, they attribute the decline to harmful social circumstances like the isolation and loneliness of some citizens (14%), personally harmful behavior like greed and dishonesty (11%), or persistent social ills such as crime, violence, drugs and scams (9%).

Some 16% of those worried about a decline in personal trust blame polarization and government gridlock or just the poor performance of government over the past generation. About one-in-ten (11%) cite the performance of the news media, whether in biased reporting, one-sided coverage or dissemination of misinformation. Beyond that, some lay the problem at the feet of Trump and Republicans, or of Democrats.

A variety of themes recur in people's written responses. Some, like this 49-year-old woman, lament the interplay of several modern realities: "We do not 'need' each other in the same ways we

used to. Our lives now don't necessarily require us to interact with anyone else beyond a surface/nominal level if we do choose it to be that way. We are, as a country, busier per capita than any other country which also does not allow for extended human interaction. The tech we use further separates us."

The notion that some 21st century factors reinforce each other came up in other ways in answers like this from a 60-year-old man: "I think people don't know their neighbors like they have in the past. Also, the polarization of opinion adds to folks' suspicions of strangers."

Some, like this 36-year-old woman, cited the pace of change on multiple fronts as a cause of declining personal trust: "A segment of the population is really struggling to embrace the changing demographics, the need to reconcile our nation's painful origins, letting go of 20th century jobs founded on Industrial Revolution templates of labor, resource management and national interests."

Many believe the fallout from political polarization is at the center of the issue of declining interpersonal trust. A 57-year-old woman summarized this view as follows: "The division caused by political opinion is making

Those who think interpersonal trust has declined cite social ills, personal behavior and government problems among the reasons

71% of adults believe Americans are less confident in each other than they were 20 years ago

Among those, % who say _____ is a reason for the decline

NET Societal and policy problems	43%
People are more isolated, lonely, out for themselves	14
People are lazy, greedy, dishonest, untrustworthy; Millennials are a particular problem	11
Crime, violence, drugs, scams, general fear	9
Racism, racially sensitive issues, sexism	6
God, religion removed from public life, decline of morals	4
Inequality, problems of the poor	4
Immigration	1
Education, school performance problems	1
NET Government activity/inactivity	16
Polarization, gridlock	15
Government performance, problems, corruption	1
Technology/internet/social media	12
NET Problems with the news media and information	11
Bias and news media performance	9
Misinformation in general, abundance of information	1
Conservative bias in news	1
Performance of Trump and Republicans	4
Performance of Democrats	2
Rise of extremism, hate	1
Other	2
Refused/Don't know	24

Note: Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers and up to three of them were coded.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.
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people become less trustful of others. When we see one political party unable to acknowledge the good things that the other party does, it sends a message to the people that no matter what the other party does, it's no good. This type of attitude trickles down to the public. When the journalists only report one side of an issue, it does a disservice to the public and to the people involved in the report.”

How does this play out in everyday life? A Millennial woman described it this way: “We have become a very polarized society where people make snap judgments about others solely based on their political leanings. It wasn't like this before. In the past people may meet someone new and get to know them and realize what they have in common, etc. Now if you meet someone and they are on the opposite end of the political scale, then people ... tend to make all-encompassing assumptions about many aspects of who that person is. And doesn't necessarily realize they have a lot in common.”

Others feel this makes even routine engagement with others more fraught. One 28-year-old man argued that this makes for self-censorship and less collaboration: “Everything is more polarized, and it is generally more difficult to disagree with someone, come to a general understanding, and move on. As you go about your day interacting with others, inherent trust is reduced because you don't want to share your beliefs with others for fear that you will be the new target of the day. Every email, text, tweet and conversation is filtered and likely does not reflect the full belief.”

A number of respondents tied tribalism to polarization in the way this 26-year-old man did: “America has divided itself into hundreds of ‘special interest’ groups whether those are created by race, religion, sexuality, etc. and it has gotten to a point where too many people are offended by what used to be considered common language, and I think it has made too many Americans ‘afraid’ of speaking and trusting people they don't know. Sometimes offending another person can have serious repercussions and it seems like most people are trying to play the ‘victim’ about everything.”

The dolorous impact of technology is a central concern, appearing in a number of the answers like this one: “[The] rise in social media and narrow cast media means that we converse in bubbles. This has led to polarization of discussions and beliefs. We have lost the ability to have civil public discourse and remember that good people can disagree.” A more succinct respondent put it, “Social media has become a cancerous blight on society.”

A kind of overarching theory of the problem of shrinking trust came from this 64-year-old woman: “Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, Western culture has increasingly become more tolerant of selfishness and greed and less respectful of sacrifice and honor. Also, the prevalent reliance on cell

phones & computers for short, indirect and impersonal communication has lessened our assurance that others are presenting information in a sincere and honest fashion. Having a President who lies routinely does not provide the nation with a noble role model.”

Overall, Americans’ confidence in each other isn’t seen as the biggest problem facing the nation

Compared with some other major concerns Americans have, their worries about interpersonal trust are relatively modest. A quarter (25%) believe that Americans’ level of confidence in each other is a very big problem and another 50% say it is a moderately big problem. That places this concern near the bottom of the list of major problems people see for the nation. In fact, more people cite as a big problem the difficulties tied to institutional distrust than issues tied to interpersonal trust. There is a bit of a partisan cast to these views: Democrats and independents who lean Democratic are more likely than Republicans and Republican leaners to think Americans’ level of confidence in each other is a big problem (29% vs. 20%).

Even though interpersonal distrust is not seen as a top-ranking issue, there is an undercurrent of urgency about addressing the problem of interpersonal trust. Fully 70% agree with another statement, “Americans’ low trust in each other makes it harder to solve many of the country’s problems.” That contrasts with 29% who back a different assertion, “The country’s problems would be just as hard to solve even if Americans’ trust in each other was higher.”

In this instance, too, Democrats are somewhat more likely than Republicans to support the idea that distrust woes are important to fix (74% vs. 66%).

Those who feel most urgently about the problem – the 25% of adults who describe lack of interpersonal confidence as a very big problem for the nation – were asked why they think that is the case. Their answers range across a host of concerns. Two-thirds of this group (67%) cite an issue tied to social or community deterioration like lack of trust among neighbors (listed by 29% of those who are highly worried about interpersonal trust as a problem), divisions among Americans tied to political polarization and “tribalism” (24%), the spread of selfishness (8%) and rising racial schisms (4%). Additionally, 8% suggest the actions of President Trump are tied to the lack of confidence Americans have in each other.

In explanations of their answers about why the level of interpersonal confidence is a very big problem, people wrote about several factors. Some started with the idea that a lack of trust stifles essential social interaction. A Gen X man put it this way: “People are allowing fear to stop them from having productive dialogue with people who have different opinions and views. The other

view point is considered evil instead of just different.” A young Millennial woman linked declining interpersonal trust to the nation’s inability to solve problems, writing, “If Americans cannot learn to value and trust each other, they will never learn to value and trust those appointed to govern us. We have to be united to conquer issues.”

That view was echoed in another response: “Hate breeds distrust, distrust thrives on fear, fear turns into mistrust, and the cycle is increased when you add in poverty to intensify [people’s] basic instincts of survival.”

A significant number tie declining trust – and the ills that flow from it – to the media environment: “Our nation has lost its heart and soul; that we have faith in each other to do the right thing. These days the media only shows the worst of America and uses the good people as PR props for a political angle,” wrote a 66-year-old woman.

And Trump figures in a share of responses like this one: “The toxic atmosphere created by the current president has

significantly impacted people’s confidence in each other.” Another respondent put it this way: “We appear to be experiencing an era of mistrust, apprehension, skepticism, fear, disenfranchisement, hatred of those not like ourselves, and disregard for the common good. Certain individuals have ascended to prominence by playing to the dark sides of human nature. We need leadership in whose light we can stand, and a rational and empathetic citizenry to bring about good for everyone.”

Those most concerned about state of interpersonal trust worry about social breakdown, polarized politics

25% of adults believe that the level of confidence Americans have in each other is a very big problem

Among those, % who say _____ is a reason that interpersonal confidence is a problem

Lack of trust relates to broad societal problems	67%
People can’t trust neighbors or fellow citizens	29
Results from polarization/tribalism	24
Results from selfishness	8
Relates to racism/strained racial relations	4
Results from lack of civility	2
Results from breakdown in morals, ignoring God	2
Makes it hard to address inequality, social safety net issues	1
<hr/>	
Results from actions of President Trump	8
Results from actions of politicians as a group	3
Results from negative/divisive media coverage	3
Results from problems tied to technology/social media	1
Results from actions of Democrats	1
Other	5
Refused/Don’t know	16

Note: Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers and up to three of them were coded.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.

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Fewer lay blame on Democrats for creating problems tied to personal trust, but there were answers along those lines. One 76-year-old man wrote, “Republicans work and pay. Democrats tax and give it away.” Another said, “[I] do not see an attempt for Democratic leaders to reach across the aisle. Too bitter that the America[n] people elected an outsider to manage what they did not.”

For those who are most anxious about the poor state of interpersonal trust, the stakes are almost cosmic. A 31-year-old man spoke for many in writing this answer: “John Marshall [the fourth chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court] said confidence is key to our democracy. As confidence in each other deteriorates, so does the strength of our democracy.”

People sort along a continuum of personal trust, depending on their views about trusting others and the risks that might arise from that

How people think about others and how to deal with them is a useful way to understand why people worry about the effects of personal trust. There is a rich literature on these issues, often focused on the role of “social capital” in people’s lives. Our survey aims to fit into that history, though with modifications to some traditional measures of interpersonal trust.

For decades, many survey researchers have followed a three-question strategy about personal trust enshrined in the work of the [General Social Survey](#). Our questions covered much of the same ground, but with changes in question wording. We embraced suggestions [by researchers at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development](#), who expressed concerns about some of the traditional language and framing of the GSS questions. Our questions:

- **Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or most people can’t be trusted?** About half (52%) opted for “most people can be trusted.”⁴ (This item is modified from the GSS version.)
- **Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance or would try to be fair no matter what?** Some 58% chose the option that people “would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance.”

⁴ It is not possible to compare these findings with long-running General Social Survey trust-related questions. Not only is the question wording substantially different in one of the questions, but it is also the case that these queries were made on the Center’s [American Trends Panel](#), a web-based method that is different from the [GSS](#) method of conducting the vast number of its interviews face-to-face. These mode-of-interview differences can produce somewhat different results even when identical questions are asked. We have found that there are [instances](#) when asking the same question in different survey modes – phone or web – also affects respondents’ answers.

- **Would you say that most of the time people try to help others or just look out for themselves?**

About six-in-ten (62%) picked “just look out for themselves.”

We organized people’s answers into a spectrum of personal trust in the following way:

- **High trusters** comprise 22% of the population. They are those who gave the pro-trust response to each question. They say, “people can be trusted,” that people “would try to be fair no matter what” and that people “try to help others.”

Whites are twice as likely as black people or Hispanics to be high trusters. The older a person is, the more likely they are to tilt toward trusting answers. The more education someone has and the greater their household income, the greater the likelihood they sit higher on the personal trust spectrum.

- **Low trusters** make up 35% of the populace and are those who gave non-trust answers to each question. They say, “people can’t be trusted,” that others “would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance” and that people “just look out for themselves.” Nearly half of young adults (46%) fall into this group – significantly higher than older groups. Those with less income and education are also markedly more likely to be low trusters.
- **Medium trusters** are those who gave mixed answers, with at least one trusting answer and one non-trusting answer to the three items. That comes to 41% of the public. People in this category of social trust make up a similar share of nearly every demographic and political group examined in this survey. (Some 2% of the public falls into none of these categories because they did not answer all these questions.) The notable thing about the medium-trusters group is how relatively uniform its demographic profile is.

Components of the personal trust scale: Are people trustworthy, fair, helpful?

% of U.S. adults who say ...

Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or most people can’t be trusted?

52% Most can be trusted **Most can’t be trusted 47%**

Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance or would try to be fair no matter what?

41% Try to be fair **Try to take advantage 58%**

Would you say that most of the time people try to help others or just look out for themselves?

37% Try to help others **Just look out for themselves 62%**

Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

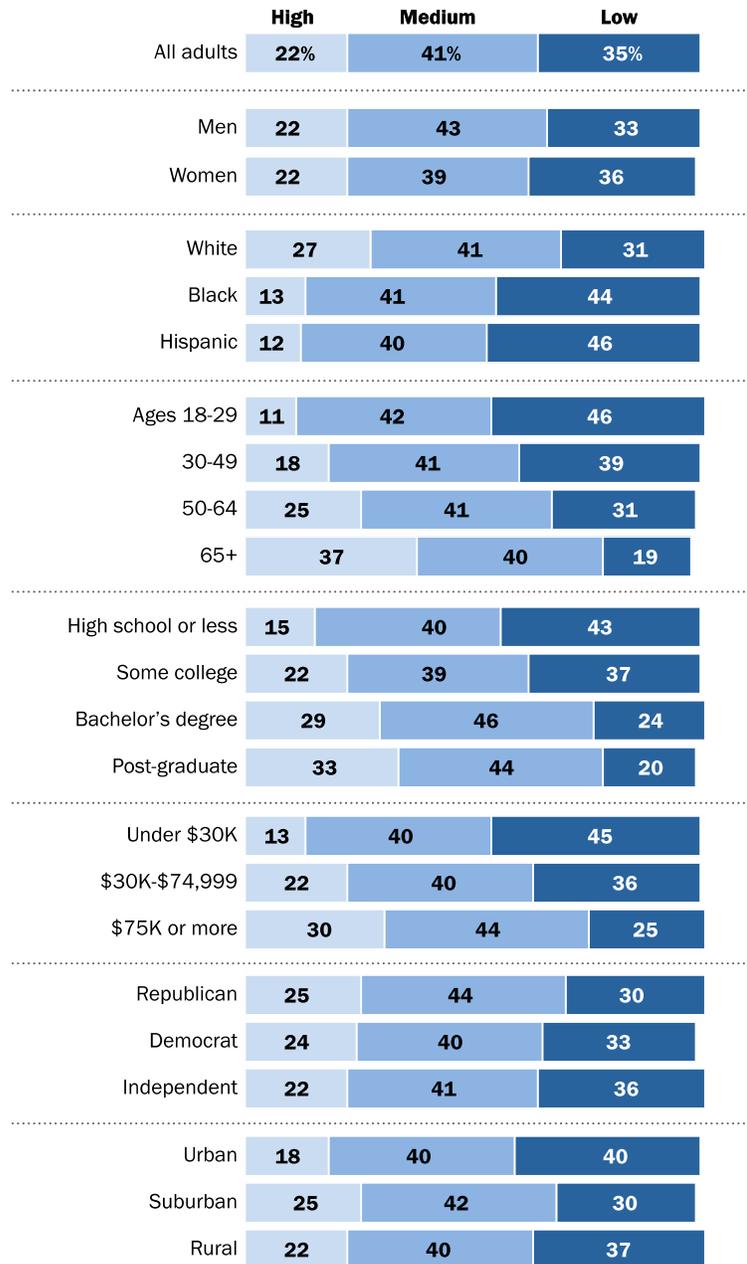
Source: Survey conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.

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Nonwhites, those under 50 and those with less education/income more likely to be low trusters

Among U.S. adults, % of each trust group who are ...



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown. Whites and blacks only include non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.

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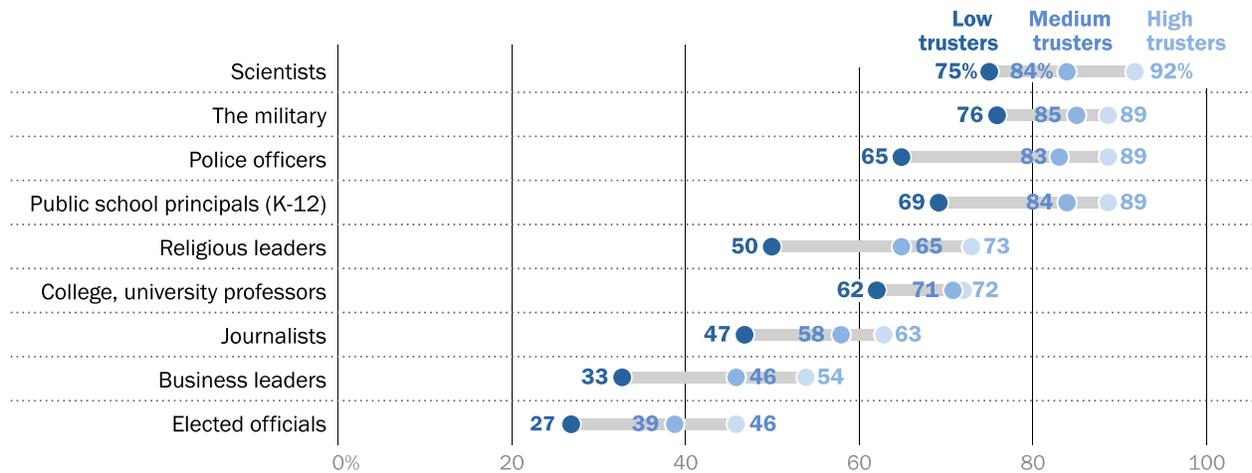
In the broad context of all three groups, it is striking that there are no partisan splits on these issues tied to interpersonal trust. Ideologically, those describing themselves as moderate are more likely to be low trusters and to answer each of the individual questions in this battery in a downbeat way.

A person’s place on the personal trust spectrum often goes hand-in-hand with their views about institutional trust

People’s views on personal trust are strongly associated with their views on issues related to institutional trust. On virtually every survey question about institutions covered in Chapter 1, high trusters have significantly more confidence in institutions than low trusters, whether it is the military, police officers, business executives or religious leaders.

Those with high personal trust have higher confidence in key leadership groups

% of U.S. adults in each group who have a great deal/fair amount of confidence that _____ will act in the best interests of the public



Note: The trust scale is built on questions about people’s general trust or distrust in others; their sense of the exploitative tendencies or fairness of others; and their assessment of the overall helpfulness or selfishness of others. For details, see Chapter 2 subsection “People sort along a continuum of personal trust.”

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.

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On other trust-related issues, low trusters stand out for their downcast views. For instance, low trusters are considerably more likely than high trusters to see various issues facing the country as “very big” problems. To begin with, low trusters are twice as likely as high trusters to think

Americans' lack of trust in each other is a very big problem (33% vs. 16%). The differences between low and high trusters also apply to such issues as the way military veterans are treated (52% of low trusters see this as a very big problem vs. 44% of high trusters who say the same), the financial stability of Social Security and Medicare (57% vs. 47%), the quality of public K-12 schools (39% vs. 30%) and the quality of roads, bridges and public transportation across the country (38% vs. 28%).

Still, Americans render at least one positive assessment in this otherwise challenging environment. While Americans have varying and nuanced views about trust in institutions and in other people, large majorities of trusters and non-trusters alike believe others trust them, personally. Some 98% of high trusters, 93% of medium trusters and 79% of low trusters agree with the statement “most people trust you.” Overall, just 11% of Americans agree with the statement “most people are suspicious of you.”

People embrace mixed strategies that combine personal caution and communal care

In addition to asking versions of traditional questions about interpersonal trust, this survey explored other personal strategies for dealing with others. By a wide margin, Americans think it is better to be cautious than to take risks (78% vs. 22%). However, by another lopsided verdict, they think it is better to work together with others (71%) than to be self-reliant (29%).

These divergent views suggest that the idea of working together is popular and somewhat immune to the ravages of low personal and institutional trust. For instance, fully 67% of low trusters on the personal trust scale say in most situations it is better to work together than be self-reliant.

On two other questions the public splits fairly evenly, and those divisions mirror related questions in the GSS battery. When they consider the question, “In most situations, do you think it’s better for people to be trusting or skeptical?” half say trusting, half say skeptical. When asked what typically happens when they, personally, first meet people, 53% say they do not trust them until they get to know them better, while 46% say they trust a stranger right away until they have reason to doubt that person.

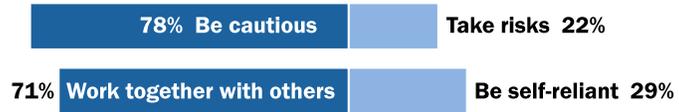
People’s views about interpersonal trust (as measured on the personal trust scale) are closely related to their answers on these personal strategies questions. For example, low trusters are twice as likely as high trusters to say that skepticism is the best mindset for most situations (63% of low trusters say this vs. 33% of high trusters) and that a cautious approach is better than a risk-taking

one (81% vs. 73%). Additionally, low trusters are more likely than high trusters to say that being self-reliant is a better choice than working together with others (33% vs. 24%).

Low trusters also are far more likely to approach others with a “prove it to me” attitude: 75% of low trusters say they do not trust others they first meet until they get to know them better. That contrasts directly with the approach high trusters take toward strangers: 73% say they trust someone they first meet right away until they have reason to doubt them.

Americans embrace caution and collaboration as personal strategies, but split on trust vs. skepticism

% of adults who say in most situations it’s better for people to ...



% of adults who say that when they first meet others, they typically ...



% of adults who say in most situations it’s better for people to ...



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.
 Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.
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While high trusters are more likely than others to think risk taking is a better strategy, a majority of high trusters still believe it is better to be cautious than take risks (73% vs. 27%).

When it comes to demographic differences, women are more likely than men to opt for caution than risk taking (82% vs. 74%) and to think that working with others is better than being self-reliant (76% vs. 65%). Blacks are somewhat more likely than whites to opt for skepticism (57% vs. 49%) over trust and choose working together with others (76% vs. 70%) over self-reliance. Interestingly, there are not very notable or consistent differences on these questions by age groups, by educational attainment, by community type and by household income. There are also no striking partisan or ideological differences on these questions.

Americans have more hope than despair about citizens' behavior on some key civic and political activities – but there are notable exceptions

How does personal trust connect to people's judgments about others' behavior in the public arena? It turns out there are some circumstances when considerably more Americans think people will work with each other and behave decently than think they won't. For instance, when invited to choose which statement comes closest to their view, 75% of Americans say that, "In a crisis, people will cooperate with each other even if they don't trust each other."

That compares with 24% who back the opposite point of view: "People will not cooperate with each other even in a crisis if they don't trust each other."

Many Americans have confidence in others to do the right thing in civic life at times, but not always

% of U.S. adults who have _____ in the American people to ...

Activities where confidence is relatively high	A great/fair amount of confidence	Not too much/no confidence
Report a serious local problem to authorities when they see it	75%	24%
Obey federal and state laws	73	27
Do what they can to help those in need	69	31
Honestly report their full income when paying taxes	63	37
Work together to solve community problems	61	39
Treat others with respect	60	40

Activities where the verdict is split

Accept election results regardless of who wins	53	47
Reconsider their views after learning new information	49	50
Stay informed about important issues and events	49	51
Respect the rights of people who are not like them	48	52

Activities where people are relatively not confident

Cast informed votes in elections	43	57
Have civil conversations with people who have different views from theirs	42	58

Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.

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Answering a battery of questions about civic and political activities, Americans offer varying views about how their fellow citizens would behave. There are some situations in which majorities think others will act in virtuous ways. They include instances of law-abiding or civically beneficial behavior. For instance, 73% of adults have "a great deal" or "fair amount" of confidence that the American people would obey federal and state laws. Similarly, six-in-ten or more U.S. adults express confidence that others would report a serious local problem to authorities when they see

it, do what they can to help those in need, honestly report their income when paying taxes, work together to solve community problems and treat others with respect.

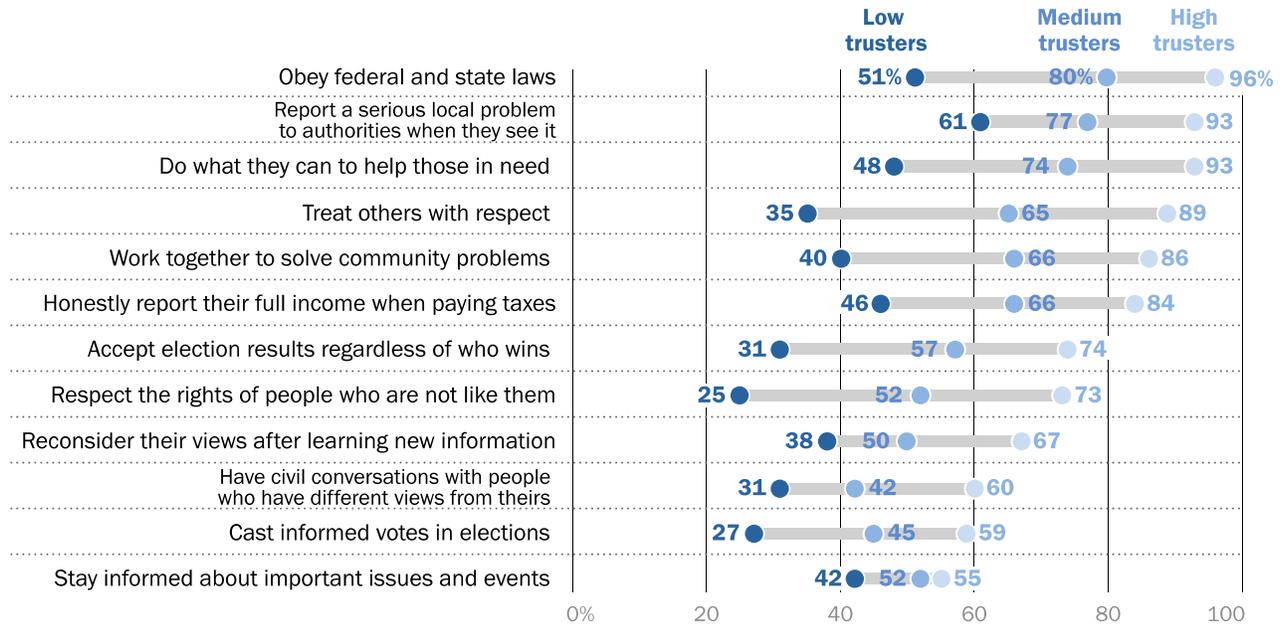
At the same time, there are some situations in which Americans are roughly split between being confident and not confident about how others would behave. These split verdicts relate to whether others would accept election results regardless of who wins, reconsider their views after learning new information, stay informed on important issues and respect others' rights.

Finally, there are activities where a majority of Americans are not confident in the capacities of others. Nearly six-in-ten Americans are not confident that fellow citizens are able to cast informed votes in elections or have civil conversations with those who have differing views.

Across the board, there are sharp differences in how Americans answer these issues depending on where they sit on the personal trust scale. High trusters generally have significantly more positive views about their fellow Americans' civic and political behaviors than do medium or low trusters. The gaps are particularly striking when it comes to how much confidence high trusters and low trusters express in Americans' willingness to treat others with respect (54 percentage point gap between high and low trusters), respect the rights of people who are not like them (48 points), do what they can to help others in need and obey federal and state laws (both have 45-point gaps), accept election results regardless of who wins (43 points) and honestly report their full income when paying taxes (38 points).

Low trusters and high trusters have sharply different confidence levels in how Americans will behave in key civic situations

% of U.S. adults in each group who have a great deal/fair amount of confidence in the American people to ...



Note: Respondents who gave other answers or no answer are not shown. The trust scale is built on questions about people's general trust or distrust in others; their sense of the exploitative tendencies or fairness of others; and their assessment of the overall helpfulness or selfishness of others. For details, see Chapter 2 subsection "People sort along a continuum of personal trust."

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.

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In addition to the difference among those who have different levels of personal trust, there are other differences on these issues related to age. Those ages 65 and older have notably higher levels of confidence in their fellow citizens than young adults ages 18 to 29. It is especially evident when it comes to people's confidence in others to respect the rights of people who are not like them, where there is a 32 percentage point gap between young adults and those 65 and older. Also, there is a 27-point gap between those age groups when it comes to confidence that others will do what they can to help those in need, a 26-point gap when the issue is confidence that people will respect each other, a 22-point spread in confidence that others will accept election results regardless of who wins, and a 21-point difference when the issue is people's confidence that others will reconsider their views after learning new information.

The generation gap is large when it comes to views on respecting others, helping those in need, accepting elections

% of U.S. adults in each age group who have a great deal/fair amount of confidence in the American people to ...

	Ages 18-29	30-49	50-64	65+	Net difference seniors vs. young adults
Respect the rights of people who are not like them	35%	41%	52%	67%	+32
Do what they can to help those in need	53	66	77	80	+27
Treat others with respect	48	57	63	74	+26
Accept election results regardless of who wins	44	50	52	66	+22
Reconsider their views after learning new information	40	42	57	61	+21
Work together to solve community problems	52	56	67	71	+19
Cast informed votes in elections	38	40	42	54	+16
Obey federal and state laws	70	70	73	79	+9

Note: Respondents who gave other answers or no answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.

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It is important to note, though, that there are some areas where different age groups essentially have the same level of confidence in other Americans' behaviors. These include their confidence in others' willingness to honestly report their full income when paying taxes, have civil conversations with those who have differing views, stay informed on important issues and report a serious problem to local authorities.

On most of these issues there are no partisan differences of opinion – Republicans and those who lean Republican and Democrats and those who lean Democratic share similar views. However, there are a couple of issues where partisan differences arise. For instance, 76% of Republicans and Republican leaners have confidence people would do what they can to help those in need, compared with 63% of Democrats and Democratic leaners who believe that. Similarly, 56% of Republicans and leaners have confidence the American people respect the rights of people who are not like them, compared with 42% of Democrats and leaners.

Democrats, though, are more upbeat about Americans being willing to accept election results regardless of who wins. Some 57% of Democrats and leaners are confident of that, compared with 47% of Republicans and GOP leaners.

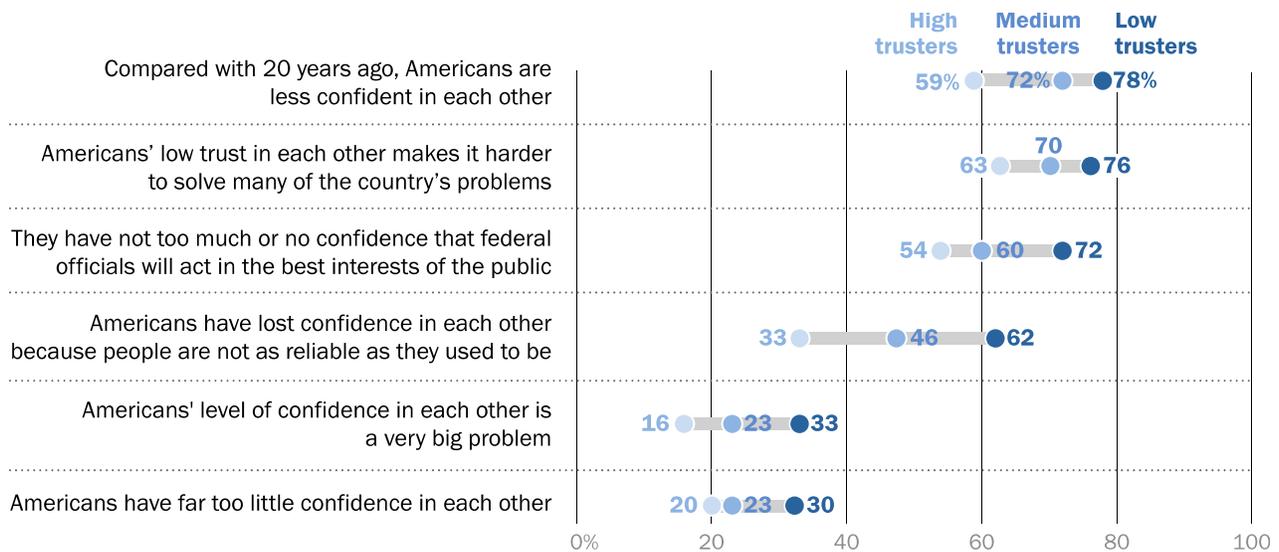
Low trusters have a more downcast sense of how distrust among Americans is affecting the country

People’s trust judgments and dispositions seem to have wide implications. Those with low interpersonal trust are more pessimistic than others across several dimensions of American life. About three-quarters of those with low trust believe that Americans’ are less confident of each other than they were 20 years ago, that Americans’ low trust in each other makes it harder to solve many of the country’s problems and that Americans have too little confidence in each other.

In addition, low trusters are more likely than high trusters to believe Americans have lost confidence in each other because people are not as reliable as they used to be and that Americans’ level of confidence in each other is a very big problem. They are also more likely than high trusters to think Americans have far too little confidence in each other (30% vs. 20%).

Those with low interpersonal trust have less hope in key parts of public life

% of U.S. adults in each group who say ...



Note: Respondents who gave other answers or no answer are not shown. The trust scale is built on questions about people’s general trust or distrust in others; their sense of the exploitative tendencies or fairness of others; and their assessment of the overall helpfulness or selfishness of others. For details, see Chapter 2 subsection “People sort along a continuum of personal trust.”

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.

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3. Americans' struggles with truth, accuracy and accountability

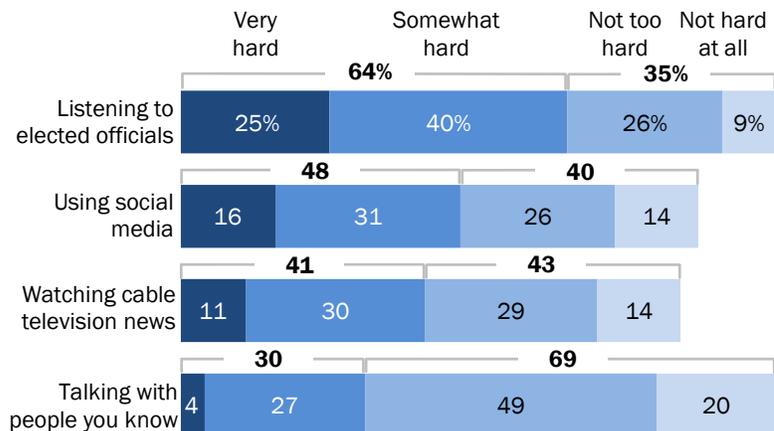
Many think America is experiencing a crisis in facts and truth, and they believe this problem ties into the current state of distrust people have in institutions. The Center recently reported that half of U.S. adults say [made-up news and information](#) is a very big problem in the country today, and about two-thirds say it causes a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events. They also say made-up news and information has a big impact on Americans' confidence in government (68%) and in each other (54%).

In this new survey we add to those insights, finding that the vast majority of adults say that Americans' level of agreement on the basic facts about issues and events is a problem. Fully 85% of adults say this is at least a moderately big problem, including 42% saying it is a very big problem. In urgency, this issue ranks alongside Americans' level of confidence in the federal government and the availability of affordable housing as problems that worry Americans. And it falls slightly above issues such as the quality of public K-12 schools and the condition of roads, bridges and public transportation across the country.

At the same time, Americans admit they at times have trouble distinguishing the truth from falsehood from certain sources. For example, nearly two-thirds (64%) of adults say it is hard to tell the difference between what's true and what's not true when listening to elected officials. Smaller shares of adults struggle with discerning facts on other media. For instance, 48% say it is hard to tell the difference between what's true and what's not true when using social media, including 16% who say it is very hard. And 41% say it is hard to tell the difference when watching cable television news. For instance, 48% say it is hard to tell the difference between what's true and what's not true when using social media, including 16% who say it is very hard. And 41% say it is hard to tell the difference when watching cable television news.

Nearly two-thirds of adults find it hard to tell what's true when elected officials speak

% of U.S. adults who say it is ___ to tell the difference between what's true and what's not true when ...



Note: Those who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.

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By contrast, a majority of adults (69%) say it is *not* hard to determine the truth when talking with people they know, while just three-in-ten (30%) struggle with truth when talking with these individuals.

While not pronounced, there are modest differences between partisans on some of these issues. For instance, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say they find it hard to tell the difference between what's true and what's not when watching cable TV news (46% vs. 38%), listening to elected officials (68% vs. 62%) or using social media (51% vs. 45%). Women are more likely than men to say they find it hard to tell the difference between what's true and not true when listening to elected officials (69% vs. 60%). And Hispanics are more likely to say they struggle with the information provided by the people they know: 40% of Hispanics find it hard to tell the difference between what's true and what's not true when listening to people they know, compared with 31% of blacks and 28% of whites.

Americans believe the government could be more transparent with the public

Not only do Americans worry about made-up information and the lack of agreement on facts, they also think that key institutional information sources withhold useful information that could appropriately be shared with the public.

A clear majority of adults say the federal government could share more with the public than it does. Fully 69% say the federal government intentionally withholds important information from the public that it could safely release. By contrast, 29% say the federal government publicly releases the important information it can safely release.

When asked exactly what important information they feel the federal government withholds, the largest shares mention domestic policy and scandals. Some 16% believe the government withholds information about specific domestic policy-related issues, which includes issues with climate and environment, issues with medicine and health, and government budgets. A similar share (14%) says the government withholds information about general government problems and scandals, such as corruption and backroom deals. The third largest category of information adults believe the government withholds is about specific foreign policy and homeland security issues (9%), including military matters and terrorism.

Political party affiliation is linked to what people feel the federal government withholds: 7% of Democrats feel the government withholds information about Trump’s taxes, business dealings and behavior, compared with 1% of Republicans. Democrats are also more likely to say the government withholds information about environmental issues.

Two-thirds of adults believe the government withholds information it could share with the public on key issues

69% of adults say the federal government intentionally withholds important information from the public that it could safely release

Among those, % who say ___ is important information withheld by the government

NET Information about specific domestic-policy issues	16
Climate and environment	7
Budget, taxes, deficits	6
Medical, health, insurance issues	3
Immigration	1
Privacy and surveillance issues	1
Economic policy	1
Guns and violence	1
Policy impact assessments/analysis	1
NET Information about general government problems and scandals	14
Information that would embarrass the government, damage its reputation	8
Government corruption and waste	5
Secret decisions, backroom deals	1
NET Information about foreign policy and homeland security issues	9
International and foreign policy issues	4
Military matters, budgets	4
Threats tied to terrorism, homeland security, crime	1
Information about Trump’s tax returns, business dealings, his behavior	5
Information about conspiracies, historic events	3
Information about FBI, Mueller, intelligence community investigations	3
Short, non-specific answers like “truth” or “the truth”	2
Information about Democratic scandals/problems	1
Other	5
Refused/Don’t know	47

Note: Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers and up to three of them were coded. Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018. “Trust and Distrust in America”

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In written responses explaining their answers, respondents gave voice to a variety of suspicions about the information the government does not share, but should share. A 76-year-old man argued, “They are not honest about most of their activities since they think that they know more about what is good for the general public than we know for ourselves.”

Relatedly, a Baby Boomer wrote: “The government conveniently classifies information that could sway the public to be against certain actions or investigations. The government needs to be more open to the public and trust in their understanding.”

Some people believe the government’s motive for keeping information secret is to protect its reputation, rather than to protect important national interests. Said one Millennial: “I think the government withholds certain pieces of information pertaining to all large-scale disasters and attacks on America and intentionally avoids information that does not show them in a favorable fashion.”

One strain of thought involved people’s worries that the government knows a lot more about American life than it shares. One Millennial pointed to “[t]he general state of the country without bias, almost anything about Trump and his various scandals, objective information of any kind.” A generational contemporary put it this way: “Relevant statistics concerning economic trends and employment metrics, that are unflattering in light of their policies and preferred narrative”

Many Americans believe that news media coverage is one-sided

The public’s concern about information withholding extends beyond the government. Some 61% say the news media intentionally ignores stories that are important to the public, while about four-in-ten (38%) believe news media makes their best effort to cover the stories important to the public.

While partisans are relatively similar in their overall judgment that the media withholds some information, there is some disagreement about the severity of one-sided coverage. About one-in-five (19%) of those who gave written responses said that the news media is biased or focuses on opinions rather than facts. Republicans are more likely than Democrats to make this complaint (22% vs. 16%). This is in line with [other findings](#) by the Center documenting a higher level of concern among Republicans about one-sided coverage. Similar to what they feel the federal government withholds, 15% of adults say the news media does not cover domestic policy-related issues such as the justice system, crime, immigration, issues involving race and issues tied to climate. And 11% say that news media leaves out good news about Trump’s accomplishments and the economy.

Republicans are also more likely than Democrats to say that news media ignores important stories about Trump’s accomplishments or good news about the economy (18% vs. 1%) and stories about Democrats’ problems and scandals. A statistically negligible number of Democrats complained about that, compared with 7% of Republicans.

That theme was covered by a 56-year-old man: “There hasn’t been a single positive story on President Trump. He’s the only sitting President to have met with a North Korean dictator, but it was spun as a negative by the media and the [Democrats]. He’s the only President who has attempted to address illegal Immigration effectively, but the media and [Democrats] spin it negatively. He’s a patriot who had a day job already and didn’t need the mess of the presidency, but entered into it as a citizen tired of the political crap that’s infected the nation...”

Majority of Americans say the news media intentionally ignores important stories

61% of adults say the news media intentionally ignores stories that are important to the public

Among those, % who say ____ is ignored by the news media

General complaints about one-sided coverage performance	19%
NET Domestic issues and policies	15
Crime and the justice system	4
Race-related issues	4
Immigration, border issues, “invasion”	3
Climate/environment issues	3
Poverty, hunger, homelessness	1
Guns	1
Stories related to religion	1
Coverage of average Americans	1
Abortion	1
NET Trump’s accomplishments, good news about the economy	11
Trump’s accomplishments	9
Good news about the economy	2
Good news in general	6
NET International news, national security stories	5
International news	4
Stories about wars in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan	1
Democrats problems, scandals	4
General political corruption and influence of special interests	2
Short, non-specific answers like “truth” or “the truth”	2
Trump’s problems and scandals	1
Other	6
Refused/Don’t know	38

Note: Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers and up to three of them were coded.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.

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One typical comment about one-sided news coverage came from a 71-year-old woman: “The truth about any story they cover. The complete story and not just tidbits doled out on a hit-or-miss coverage. The ‘news’ reported consists more and more of gossip about individuals from the ‘entertainment’ industry as well as politicians and/or issues with which the media has bias. I

frequently find myself asking questions about why I am hearing/seeing a story about some ‘entertainers’ divorce issues or a volcano eruption in Indonesia when neither of these has any direct impact on me and mine.”

For a number of respondents, the issue is not so much ignored news subjects as not-fully-covered stories. Wrote one: “I think that, as much as anything, they slant coverage to reflect their own opinions. Ignore may be a strong word, downplay might be a better or word and or it may be they just put more emphasis on the stories that reflect their leanings. I also think that this is reflected on the local level as well.”

Others said some specific issues are not fully covered. A Millennial man wrote, “Climate change is not given enough coverage. I believe looking at who a politician’s donors are is more illuminating than simply covering some speech they gave, and yet is never in the news. News media is a business and thus ignores stories that may affect purchasing of ad space either in their newspapers or during their commercials. This means we do not get a full picture of the news, only what they allow.”

Lack of trust in federal government’s information sharing and in news media’s coverage links to other struggles and concerns

The public’s lack of faith in the government’s and news media’s abilities to fully inform the public ties to the way Americans respond to various trust-related issues. For example, adults who say that the federal government intentionally withholds important information from the public are more likely than others to say that Americans’ trust in the federal government has been shrinking (80% vs. 63% among those who say the government does not release some useful information) and to say they are not confident that elected officials act in the public’s best interest (67% vs. 53%).

They are also more likely to point out problems, such as Americans’ level of agreement on the basic facts about issues or events (89% vs. 78%) and Americans’ level of confidence in the federal government (89% vs. 80%).

Similar patterns exist for adults who believe that news media intentionally ignores some stories that are important to the public. These adults are more than three times as likely as those who say news media makes their best effort to cover the stories that are important to the public to say that they are not confident that news media acts in the best interest of the public (71% vs. 22%). And 45% of those who say news media ignores stories also say that it is hard to tell the difference between what is and is not true when watching cable television news, compared with 35% of those who believe news media is doing their best.

4. Americans' solutions for trust-related problems

Most believe that Americans' trust in their government and in each other can be improved. They propose an array of solutions to achieve these improvements, including increasing government transparency, improving community cooperation and performing individual acts of kindness. A share of the public thinks that more political compromise on national issues could restore trust both in the federal government and in interpersonal relationships. Some make the case that more media focus on positive stories, like acts of collaboration, might inspire greater trust.

Overall, large majorities of Americans have hope that trust can be improved: 84% believe it is possible to improve the level of confidence Americans have in the federal government, and 86% believe it is possible to increase the confidence Americans have in each other. Substantial majorities across demographic groups and political persuasions embrace the idea that progress can be

made, but some other variances among groups are worth noting. One consistent pattern is that those who are high on the personal trust scale are more likely than those who are low trusters to think that improvement is possible.

Although majorities of all demographic and political groups say it is possible to improve Americans' confidence in the federal government, differences between groups still exist. For instance, whites (87%) are more likely than black (71%) or Hispanic adults (81%) to say that the level of confidence in the federal government can be improved. Those with college degrees or higher are more likely than those without a college degree to think things can be improved (91%

Those with higher levels of social trust are more likely to think Americans' confidence in each other and in government can be improved

% of U.S. adults in each group who think ...

... it is possible to improve the level of confidence Americans have in each other



... it is possible to improve the level of confidence Americans have in the federal government



Note: Respondents who gave other answers or no answer are not shown. The trust scale is built on questions about people's general trust or distrust in others; their sense of the exploitative tendencies or fairness of others; and their assessment of the overall helpfulness or selfishness of others. For details, see Chapter 2 subsection "People sort along a continuum of personal trust."

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 7-Dec. 10, 2018.

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vs. 81%, respectively). A similar gap exists between those living in households earning \$75,000 or more and those in households earning less than \$30,000 (91% vs. 77%). Patterns are similar when it comes to interpersonal trust.

Many think increasing government transparency and fixing leadership problems can increase confidence in the federal government

When they consider the past 20 years, those who are concerned about Americans' declining confidence in the federal government cite a host of factors they think caused the decline, including polarization and gridlock, the overall poor performance of government, the role of money in politics, President Trump's performance and behavior, and problems with media coverage of politics. Those who believe the situation can improve sketch out a variety of strategies for making things better.

About three-quarters (73%) of those who think it is possible to improve Americans' confidence in the federal government offered an answer to the open-ended question we asked about solutions. About a quarter of them (23%) recommend political reforms, including less secrecy in government activities, more honesty from politicians, term limits and curtailing the role of money in politics. Another 15% call for general improvements in political leadership, while 7% specifically seek remedies to Trump's behaviors and performance as a solution. Some 12% think collaborative problem solving that brings people together might prompt a better kind of national politics. An additional 8% cite policy fixes related to issues like taxing and spending, economic disparities and social safety net issues would increase confidence in the federal government.

In their written responses explaining how Americans' confidence in government could be approved, many advocated for change in political culture and systems. One man, 49, advocated a wholesale makeover of political culture: "Our horrible, polarized, dysfunctional federal government is a result of an ignorant, naive, misinformed, polarized electorate addicted to social media and stupid entertainments. And it's a result of gerrymandering, and the flawed electoral college system of electing a president. And of the overrepresentation of rural red states in the Senate. A good first step to improving confidence in the federal government would be to change the makeup of the government to better reflect the electorate."

Those who think trust in the federal government can be improved push for political reforms, better leadership

84% of adults think it is possible to improve Americans' confidence in the federal government

Among those, the % who think _____ would improve confidence

NET Political reforms and changes	23%
Practicing more transparency, less secrecy	16
Enacting term limits	4
Curtailing the role of money in politics	3
Conducting fair elections	2
Fixing Constitution	1
Improving political leadership and government performance	15
Working together in communities to solve problems	12
<hr/>	
NET Fixing/adopting policy changes to address ...	8
Tax and budget issues	3
Economic problems	2
Health care/insurance	1
Education	1
Welfare, entitlements	1
Immigration	1
All the country's problems	1
<hr/>	
Getting rid of/dealing with Trump	7
Reforming the news media	4
Bringing corrupt leaders to justice	2
Keeping promises	2
Changing use of technology/internet/social media	1
Letting Trump do his job	1
Relying more on facts	1
Stopping Democrats from causing problems	1
Making spiritual and religious changes	1
Other	7
Refused/Don't know	33

Note: Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers and up to three of them were coded.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.

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Others wrote that the quality of leadership has a direct effect on trust. A 69-year-old man wrote: “Elected officials with integrity would help immensely. I believe it is unethical to run for office based on criticism of your opponent. Sadly, people are elected based on who tells the best or most popular lies.”

Trump was prominently mentioned in a notable share of answers. At times, respondents like this woman, 51, argued that his departure from the scene would be helpful: “We are currently without a leader of any kind. Trump is the opposite of a leader, dividing and inflaming at every turn. He represents the death of democracy in America.”

Some argued the exact opposite and said allowing Trump to do his job would be a trust restorative. A 45-year-old woman put it this way: “President Trump’s agenda is constantly hitting roadblocks through the media’s biased coverage and the unnecessary investigations, a.k.a. the ‘witch hunt,’ to pave way for impeachment. Trump was elected based on his promises and he is doing an amazing job keeping his promises. A huge step to improve confidence in the federal government would be to let Trump do his job with accurate news coverage.”

A number of respondents pressed for reducing the role of money in politics because they think it distorts priorities in trust-harming ways. Said one man, 63: “We are not represented properly. Special interest groups and corporations run the government. Take money out of politics! If an elected official is sponsored by a special interest group, who is that official going to represent? It’s not complicated.” A similar fix-it approach came from this 52-year-old Gen X man: “Appoint people with ethics and the public at heart. Stop appointing people from industries they will oversee. Stop income inequality and stop trickle-down economics and tax breaks to the rich. Get more money into the middle class and to the poor. Stop making the rich richer and stop creating an oligarchy.”

Some respondents cited policy solutions they think would make people feel more confident about their government and its role in their lives. One wide-ranging answer came from a 68-year-old woman: “Guaranteeing affordable health care. Reining in election spending. Reining in corporate lobbying and campaign spending. Meeting obligations to veterans. Leading the Judiciary in sentencing reform and de-incarceration of matured, stable prisoners. Demilitarizing law enforcement. Reforming environmental regulation to be more equitable and less ponderous. Reforming agricultural protections to benefit smaller enterprises. Protecting the security of elections and electronic communication.”

Another woman took a different tack and argued that trust would increase if the federal government only focused on the matters it could effectively tackle. As she put it: “If we would face

reality that the federal government ... should not and is not able to solve all our problems. If it would focus on limited governing, and do that well, confidence could be improved.”

Some Americans argued that the tone and focus of the news media are at fault and that confidence in government would be restored with changes there. As a woman, 63, put it: “News media reports only the negative and sensationalizes it and ignores everything positive. If the public was given more positive information about things the government has done, confidence of the American people could be elevated.”

Others, like this 27-year-old man, made the case for compromise and greater reliance on expertise: “If our elected officials, including POTUS, made an actual effort to work together and compromise, that might improve trust. Additionally, if elected officials actually believed their country’s experts (e.g., scientists) and took heed of reports and recommendations, that may also improve confidence.”

A 52-year-old woman wrote about historic trends: “Confidence in the federal government has been eroding steadily over time. Watergate was the first blow to confidence in the federal government, then starting with Bill Clinton it has gone into a deep dive. People need to open their minds to others’ opinions rather than just holding onto what they already believe. The media and social media could do a better job of reporting the truth and setting the agenda, encouraging people to build bridges rather than creating continual division.”

Many Americans say interpersonal trust problems can be fixed with outreach efforts in their community and acts of kindness

Some 72% of those who think it is possible to improve the level of confidence Americans have in each other answered an open-ended question seeking their ideas for solutions.

The most common recommendations among this group are for people to change their interpersonal behavior, with three-in-ten Americans (30%) offering proposals along those lines. These responses included suggestions that people be less tribal and partisan – that if people spent more time getting to know others, especially those whose views did not align with their own, they would end up finding interests or ideas in common. That, they argued, would increase trust.

Those who think Americans' trust in each other can be improved seek changes in personal behavior and community cooperation

86% of adults think it is possible Americans to improve Americans' confidence in each other

Among those, the % who think _____ would improve confidence

NET Changes in personal behavior	30%
Being less partisan/tribal, respect others	13
Being kind and cooperate, particularly on local projects	11
Being more personally honest and trustworthy	6
Electing better, more inspiring leaders	10
NET Reforming and reorienting the news	8
Ending fake news, sensational, divisive coverage	6
Reporting more good news, stories about people solving problems	2
NET Fixing/adopting policy changes to address problems with ...	5
Education	2
The political system/gerrymandering	1
Economy	1
Safety net problems	1
Crime	1
Literacy	1
NET Embracing programs to improve human behavior relating to ...	4
Racism	1
Incivility	1
Identity politics	1
A lack of a belief in a unified America	1
Impeaching Trump, elect someone else	3
Embracing religious, moral solutions	3
Changing the way people use technology/internet/social media	1
Reducing the size of government, more personal responsibility	1
Only a national crisis will restore trust	1
Other	4
Refused/Don't know	24

Note: Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers and up to three of them were coded.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.

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One illustrative quote from open-ended answers in the survey came from a 66-year-old woman: “Each one of us must reach out to others. Even people who are the same, but unknown to you, an individual may distrust. It takes interaction with people face-to-face to realize that we do all inhabit this space and have a vested interest in working together to make it a successful, safe, and environmentally secure place to live. No man is an island.”

A related thought from a 47-year-old man: “Intentionally creating dialogue between differing sides: police with community members, principals with parents, politicians with each other, liberals and conservatives, different religious groups, etc. Skilled moderators probably will be necessary.”

Another group of respondents concentrates on the virtues of being kind and cooperating with others. Many of them believe that neighbors working side-by-side on local projects would inevitably lead to more trusting relationships in communities, and that such projects would draw people out of more isolated and lonely circumstances. One woman, 79, put it this way: “Seek common ground that engages as many as possible in the community and organize around a project that addresses that common concern.”

A third group of answers that fell in this category relate to individual accountability. These individuals argue that interpersonal trust would grow if people took responsibility for their lives and modeled trustworthy behavior for others. An illustrative quote from open-ended answers in the survey came from a 34-year-old woman, who said trust would improve if the country had “more people displaying more effort to take care of themselves, their health, their finances, their life-altering choices. Someone who can’t take care of themselves can’t be assumed to be able to take care of anything outside of themselves.”

Another 32-year-old woman said, “Get to know your local community. Take small steps towards improving daily life, even if it’s just a trash pickup. If people feel engaged with their environment and with each other, and they can work together even in a small way, I think that builds a foundation for working together on more weighty issues.”

One-in-ten (10%) who think interpersonal trust can be improved look at the role leaders play in setting the tone for the culture. They assert that better, more inspiring and less divisive leaders would set a tone for the country that would affect the way Americans think about the trustworthiness of others. For example, one 58-year-old man argued: “It starts with our leaders including: federal government, local governments, schools, businesses, etc. They must set examples for the people, showing honesty, integrity, and welfare for others and being less selfish.

This would have a trickle-down effect on the whole. Until this happens, don't plan on it getting any better.”

Some 8% seek improvements in media culture as the pathway to better person-to-person relationships. They attack things like “fake news,” biased coverage, one-sided story-telling and the way journalists focus on negative, divisive and sensational narrative lines. As one participant, a 42-year-old man, put it: “I believe that the media stokes much of the discord in public today. I think that sensationalism and opinion should be reduced and replaced by unbiased journalism as often as possible.”

A portion of respondents (2%) make the case that more good news about successes and feats of collaboration would show a side of community life that could ease interpersonal tensions and help people see that the world is not relentlessly foul. Here is how one 48-year-old man sees it: “News and media show all the negative/bad things going on, so people are not trusting of anyone. Media should show more of the good news and the good people do, rather than always reporting the bad things.”

A few Americans believe that Trump and his allies have made it harder to trust others; fewer make that argument about Democrats, but that did come up in fewer than 1% of the answers.

Others believe that improvements in policy areas or education spaces might ease interpersonal distrust. A portion of Americans also see a cause-effect connection between digital technology and social pathologies. They think that the degree to which people, especially younger Americans, spend time with their screens means they have withdrawn from interacting with others and that personal trust takes a hit. “I think society needs to not be glued to electronics and social media,” wrote a 51-year-old woman. “This affects people's social skills and it often keeps them from dealing with reality.”

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Methodology

The American Trends Panel survey methodology

The American Trends Panel (ATP), created by Pew Research Center, is a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults. Panelists participate via self-administered web surveys. Panelists who do not have internet access at home are provided with a tablet and wireless internet connection. The panel is being managed by Ipsos.

Data in this report are drawn from the panel wave conducted November 27–December 10, 2018. A total of 10,618 panelists responded out of 13,570 who were sampled, for a response rate of 78%.

The cumulative response rate accounting for nonresponse to the recruitment surveys and attrition is 3.7%. The margin of sampling error for the full sample of 10,618 respondents is plus or minus 1.5 percentage points.

The ATP was created in 2014, with the first cohort of panelists invited to join the panel at the end of a large, national, landline and cellphone random-digit-dial

survey that was conducted in both English and Spanish. Two additional recruitments were conducted using the same method in 2015 and 2017, respectively. Across these three surveys, a total of 19,718 adults were invited to join the ATP, of which 9,942 agreed to participate.

In August 2018, the ATP switched from telephone to address-based recruitment. Invitations were sent to a random, address-based sample (ABS) of households selected from the U.S. Postal Service’s Delivery Sequence File. In each household, the adult with the next birthday was asked to go online to complete a survey, at the end of which they were invited to join the panel. For a random half-sample of invitations, households without internet access were instructed to return a postcard. These households were contacted by telephone and sent a tablet if they agreed to participate. A total of 9,396 were invited to join the panel, and 8,778 agreed to join the panel and completed an initial profile survey.

American Trends Panel recruitment surveys

Recruitment dates	Mode	Invited	Joined	Active panelists remaining
Jan. 23 to March 16, 2014	Landline/ cell RDD	9,809	5,338	2,515
Aug. 27 to Oct. 4, 2015	Landline/ cell RDD	6,004	2,976	1,471
April 25 to June 4, 2017	Landline/ cell RDD	3,905	1,628	806
Aug. 8, 2018–Oct. 31, 2018	ABS/web	9,396	8,778	8,778
	Total	29,114	18,720	13,570

Note: Approximately once per year, panelists who have not participated in multiple consecutive waves or who did not complete an annual profiling survey are removed from the panel. Panelists also become inactive if they ask to be removed from the panel.

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Of the 18,720 individuals who have ever joined the ATP, 13,570 remain active panelists and continue to receive survey invitations.

Weighting

The ATP data were weighted in a multistep process that begins with a base weight incorporating the respondents' original survey selection probability and the fact that in 2014 and 2017 some respondents were subsampled for invitation to the panel. The next step in the weighting uses an iterative technique that aligns the sample to population benchmarks on the dimensions listed in the accompanying table.

Sampling errors and statistical-significance tests take into account the effect of weighting. Interviews are conducted in both English and Spanish, but the American Trends Panel's Hispanic sample is predominantly U.S. born and English speaking.

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey:

Weighting dimensions

Variable	Benchmark source
Gender	2017 American Community Survey
Age	
Education	
Race/Hispanic origin	
Hispanic nativity	
Region x Metropolitan status	2018 CPS March Supplement
Volunteerism	2015 CPS Volunteer Supplement
Voter registration	2016 CPS Voting and Registration Supplement
Party affiliation	Average of the three most recent Pew Research Center telephone surveys.
Internet access	2018 Pew Research Center internet core trends telephone survey

Note: Estimates from the ACS are based on non-institutionalized adults. Voter registration is calculated using procedures from Hur, Achen (2013) and rescaled to include the total US adult population.

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Group	Unweighted sample size	Plus or minus ...
Total sample	10,618	1.5 percentage points
Half sample	At least 5,267	2.1 percentage points
Quarter sample	At least 2,645	3.0 percentage points
Republican/lean Rep	4,306	2.4 percentage points
Half sample	At least 2,111	3.4 percentage points
Quarter sample	At least 1,070	4.8 percentage points
Democrat/lean Dem	5,923	2.0 percentage points
Half sample	At least 2,958	2.9 percentage points
Quarter sample	At least 1,475	4.1 percentage points
18-29	1,398	4.2 percentage points
Half sample	At least 688	5.9 percentage points
Quarter sample	At least 353	8.3 percentage points
30-49	3,513	2.6 percentage points
Half sample	At least 1,745	3.7 percentage points
Quarter sample	At least 862	5.3 percentage points
50-64	3,190	2.8 percentage points
Half sample	At least 1,583	3.9 percentage points
Quarter sample	At least 791	5.5 percentage points
65+	2,510	3.1 percentage points
Half sample	At least 1,247	4.4 percentage points
Quarter sample	At least 636	6.2 percentage points
Low Trusters	2,816	2.9 percentage points
Half sample	At least 1,365	4.2 percentage points
Quarter sample	At least 677	6.0 percentage points
Medium Trusters	4,377	2.4 percentage points
Half sample	At least 2,192	3.3 percentage points
Quarter sample	At least 1,118	4.7 percentage points
High Trusters	3,186	2.8 percentage points
Half sample	At least 1,594	3.9 percentage points
Quarter sample	At least 792	5.5 percentage points

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.

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Topline questionnaire

**2018 PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S AMERICAN TRENDS PANEL
WAVE 40 NOVEMBER
FINAL TOPLINE
NOVEMBER 27 – DECEMBER 10, 2018
TOTAL N=10,618**

RANDOMIZE SOCTRUST2, GSSTRUST2, GSSTRUST3, TRUSTME

ASK ALL:

SOCTRUST2 Generally speaking, would you say that... **[RANDOMIZE]**

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

52	Most people can be trusted
47	Most people can't be trusted
1	No answer

ASK ALL:

GSSTRUST2 Do you think most people... **[RANDOMIZE]**

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

58	Would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance
41	Would try to be fair no matter what
1	No answer

ASK ALL:

GSSTRUST3 Would you say that most of the time people... **[RANDOMIZE]**

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

37	Try to help others
62	Just look out for themselves
1	No answer

ASK ALL:

TRUSTME Generally speaking, do you think... **[RANDOMIZE]**

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

89	Most people trust you
11	Most people are suspicious of you
<1	No answer

ASK ALL:

CONFVALUES Generally speaking, how much confidence, if any, do you have in the American people to... [RANDOMIZE WITHIN EACH FORM]

	<u>A great deal of confidence</u>	<u>A fair amount of confidence</u>	<u>Not too much confidence</u>	<u>No confidence at all</u>	<u>No answer</u>
ASK FORM 1 ONLY [N=2,622]:					
a. Accept election results regardless of who wins Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	9	43	36	11	<1
b. Cast informed votes in elections Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	5	37	47	10	<1
c. Respect the rights of people who are not like them Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	7	41	41	11	<1
ASK FORM 2 ONLY [N=2,668]:					
d. Obey federal and state laws Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	11	62	22	5	<1
	<u>A great deal of confidence</u>	<u>A fair amount of confidence</u>	<u>Not too much confidence</u>	<u>No confidence at all</u>	<u>No answer</u>
e. Reconsider their views after learning new information Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	5	45	43	7	<1
f. Honestly report their full income when paying taxes Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	7	55	32	5	1
ASK FORM 3 ONLY [N=2,683]:					
g. Work together to solve community problems Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	9	52	35	4	<1
h. Do what they can to help those in need Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	12	57	28	2	<1
i. Treat others with respect Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	10	50	37	3	<1
ASK FORM 4 ONLY [N=2,645]:					
j. Have civil conversations with people who have different views from theirs Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	4	38	50	8	<1

k. Stay informed about important issues and events					
Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	6	42	45	6	1
l. Report a serious local problem to authorities when they see it					
Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	17	58	21	4	<1

ASK ALL:

CONF1 How much confidence, if any, do you have in each of the following to act in the best interests of the public? [**RANDOMIZE ITEMS, SPLIT OVER THREE SCREENS**]

	<u>A great deal of confidence</u>	<u>A fair amount of confidence</u>	<u>Not too much confidence</u>	<u>No confidence at all</u>	<u>No answer</u>
a. Elected officials					
Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	4	33	48	15	<1
Jan 29-Feb 13, 2018	3	22	52	23	<1
May 10-Jun 6, 2016	3	24	54	19	1

ASK FORM 1 OR 4 ONLY**[N=5,267]:**

b1. The news media					
Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	10	38	33	19	<1
Jan 29-Feb 13, 2018	8	32	35	25	<1
May 10-Jun 6, 2016	5	33	40	21	1

ASK FORM 2 OR 3 ONLY**[N=5,351]:**

b2. Journalists					
Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	15	41	28	16	<1

ASK ALL:

c. The military					
Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	41	41	12	4	1
Jan 29-Feb 13, 2018	39	41	15	4	<1
May 10-Jun 6, 2016	33	46	15	5	1
d. Religious leaders					
Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	15	47	27	11	1
Jan 29-Feb 13, 2018	9	40	34	16	1
May 10-Jun 6, 2016	13	39	32	14	1
e. Business leaders					
Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	4	39	43	14	<1
Jan 29-Feb 13, 2018	5	40	42	13	<1
May 10-Jun 6, 2016	4	37	44	14	1

f.	Scientists					
	Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	33	49	14	3	<1
	Jan 29-Feb 13, 2018	27	52	17	5	<1
	May 10-Jun 6, 2016	21	55	18	4	1
g.	College and university professors					
	Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	18	50	22	10	<1
h.	Police officers					
	Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	30	48	16	5	<1
i1.	Public school principals and superintendents for grades K-12					
	Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	22	55	17	5	1
i2.	Public school principals for grades K-12					
	Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	25	55	16	4	<1

ASK ALL:

CONF2

A variety of officials work at federal agencies. How much confidence, if any, do you have in these different groups to act in the best interest of the public?

[RANDOMIZE ITEMS a and b]

		A great <u>deal</u>	A fair <u>amount</u>	Not too <u>much</u>	No confidence <u>at all</u>	No <u>answer</u>
a.	Officials appointed by a president to oversee government agencies					
	Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	5	37	40	17	1
b.	Career employees at government agencies who are not appointed by a president					
	Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	11	50	29	9	1

ASK ALL:

CONFLEVEL

Overall, how much confidence would you say Americans have in the federal government?

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

3	A great deal
29	A fair amount
57	Not too much
10	No confidence at all
<1	No answer

ASK ALL:

PROBS Thinking about some of the issues facing the country these days, how much of a problem, if at all, are each of the following?

	<u>A very big problem</u>	<u>A moderately big problem</u>	<u>A small problem</u>	<u>Not a problem at all</u>	<u>No answer</u>
a. Americans' level of confidence in the federal government Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	41	45	11	2	1
b. Americans' level of confidence in each other Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	25	50	21	3	<1
ASK FORM 1 ONLY [N=2,622]:					
c. Americans' level of agreement on the basic facts about issues and events Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	42	43	13	2	1
d. The ability of Democrats and Republicans to work together in Washington Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	62	28	7	2	<1
ASK FORM 2 ONLY [N=2,668]:					
e. The way military veterans are treated Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	49	33	14	3	1
f. The role of lobbyists and special interest groups in Washington Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	53	30	13	3	1
ASK FORM 3 ONLY [N=2,683]:					
g. The quality of public K-12 schools Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	36	42	18	3	<1
h. The condition of roads, bridges and public transportation across the country Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	33	44	20	2	<1
ASK FORM 4 ONLY [N=2,645]:					
i. The financial stability of Social Security and Medicare Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	53	35	9	2	1
j. The availability of affordable housing Nov 27-Dec 10, 2018	44	37	15	3	1

IF R THINKS LEVEL OF CONFIDENCE IN FED GOVT OR EACH OTHER IS A VERY BIG PROBLEM
 PROBSOPEN1 In a sentence or two, please describe why you think Americans' level of confidence in the federal government is very big problem. **[OPEN END]**

REASONS WHY CONFIDENCE IN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IS A "VERY BIG PROBLEM"
[N=1889]

Nov 27-

Dec 10

2018

84 Gave an answer
 16 Refused

Nov 27-

Dec 10

2018

22 Corrupt/self-interested and self-serving politicians
 20 **NET** Trump and Republicans create the problem
 19 Results from Trump's behavior and policies
 1 Results from Republican party activities
 17 **NET** Broad societal problems
 13 Lack of trust leads to societal ills
 1 Makes it hard to address racism and racially sensitive issues
 1 Makes it hard to address poverty and related issues
 1 Results from the public's ignorance
 * Reflects a decline in morals
 10 Results from government gridlock/political polarization
 2 Results from news media bias
 2 Results from Democratic party/leaders behavior and policies
 1 Results from the size of government and its performance
 1 Results from election-related issues/gerrymandering
 * Results from people's use of technology/internet/social media
 11 Other
 17 Refused/Don't know

IF R THINKS LEVEL OF CONFIDENCE IN EACH OTHER A VERY BIG PROBLEM

PROBSOPEN1 In a sentence or two, please describe why you think Americans' level of confidence in each other is very big problem. **[OPEN END]**

REASONS WHY CONFIDENCE IN EACH OTHER "VERY BIG PROBLEM" [N=842]

Nov 27-

Dec 10

2018

85 Gave an answer
 15 Refused

Nov 27-

Dec 10

2018

67	NET Lack of interpersonal trust relates to broad societal problems
29	Can't trust neighbors or fellow citizens
24	Results from political polarization/tribalism
1	Results from Republican party activities
8	Results from selfishness
4	Results from racism and racial sensitivity problems
2	Relates to lack of civility
2	Results from a breakdown in morals
1	Makes it hard to address inequality/social safety net issues
8	Results from the behavior/activities of Trump
3	Relates to the performance of politicians as a group
3	Relates from negative/divisive news media coverage
1	Results from the behavior/activity of Democratic party/leaders
1	Results from election-related issues/gerrymandering
5	Other
16	Refused/Don't know

ASK ALL:

LACKTRUST1 Would you say Americans' level of trust in the FEDERAL GOVERNMENT has been...
[RANDOMIZE "Growing" and "Shrinking"; ALWAYS DISPLAY "Staying about the same" LAST]

Nov 27-

Dec 10

2018

8	Growing
75	Shrinking
17	Staying about the same
1	No answer

ASK ALL:

LACKTRUST2 Would you say Americans' level of trust in EACH OTHER has been...
[RANDOMIZE "Growing" and "Shrinking"; ALWAYS DISPLAY "Staying about the same" LAST, IN SAME ORDER AS LACKTRUST1]

Nov 27-

Dec 10

2018

7	Growing
64	Shrinking
29	Staying about the same
<1	No answer

ASK IF FORM=1 OR FORM=4 [N=5,267]:SOLVE1 Which comes closer to your view – even if neither is exactly right? **[RANDOMIZE]**Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

64	Low trust in the federal government makes it harder to solve many of the country's problems
35	The country's problems would be just as hard to solve even if trust in the federal government was higher
1	No answer

ASK IF (FORM=1 OR FORM=4) AND (SOLVE1=1):SOLVE2 Please name any issues that you think cannot be effectively addressed because Americans do not trust the federal government. **[OPEN END]****ISSUES THAT CANNOT BE EFFECTIVELY ADDRESSED BECAUSE AMERICANS DO NOT TRUST THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT [N=3,564]**Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

60	Gave an answer
40	Refused

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

39	NET Social issues
17	Immigration
13	Health/medical/insurance issues
6	Racism and racial sensitive issues
5	Gun-related issues
4	Inequality, poverty, social safety net issues
4	Issues related to Social Security and entitlements
2	K-12 and college education improvements, student loans
2	Criminal justice/reform issues
1	Abortion
1	Gay rights, LGBTQ-related issues
1	Sexism/harassment issues
1	Privacy-related issues
*	Crime-related issues
*	Addiction-related issues
*	Legalizing marijuana
*	Problems connected to the FBI, intelligence community
12	Many issues (listing 4 or more problems), all issues
12	NET Economic and budget issues
5	Tax policy/reform
4	Debt and deficits
1	Jobs and economic performance
1	Infrastructure

10	Climate and environment issues
6	NET Politics, elections, governance issues
4	Election reform, voting integrity
3	Corruption, role of money, gridlock
3	Issues related to Trump's performance/behavior
3	NET Foreign policy/national security issues
2	Geopolitics/international relations issues
1	Trade
*	Russia
*	War-related issues
5	Other
42	Refused/Don't know

ASK IF FORM=2 OR FORM=3 [N=5,351]:

SOLVE3 Which comes closer to your view – even if neither is exactly right? **[RANDOMIZE]**

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

70	Americans' low trust in each other makes it harder to solve many of the country's problems
29	The country's problems would be just as hard to solve even if Americans' trust in each other was higher
1	No answer

ASK IF FORM=1 OR FORM=4 [N=5,267]:

TELLTRUTH How hard is it for you to tell the difference between what's true and what's not true when you are... **[RANDOMIZE]**

a. Using social media

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

16	Very hard
31	Somewhat hard
26	Not too hard
14	Not hard at all
12	I don't use social media
1	No answer

b. Watching cable television news

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

11	Very hard
30	Somewhat hard
29	Not too hard
14	Not hard at all
16	I don't watch cable television news

<1 No answer

c. Talking with people you know

Nov 27-

Dec 10

2018

4	Very hard
27	Somewhat hard
49	Not too hard
20	Not hard at all
1	No answer

d. Listening to elected officials

Nov 27-

Dec 10

2018

25	Very hard
40	Somewhat hard
26	Not too hard
9	Not hard at all
1	No answer

ASK IF FORM=1 OR FORM=4 [N=5,267]:

INSTCONF1 Compared with 20 years ago, do you think Americans as a whole are... [**RANDOMIZE "More confident in the federal government" AND "Less confident in the federal government", WITH "About the same" ALWAYS LAST**]

Nov 27-

Dec 10

2018

6	More confident in the federal government
76	Less confident in the federal government
17	About the same
1	No answer

ASK IF R THINKS PEOPLE ARE LESS CONFIDENT IN FEDERAL GOVT (INSTCONF1=2):

INSTCONF2 In your own words, what do you think are the most important reasons why the American public is now less confident in the federal government than it was 20 years ago? [**OPEN-END RESPONSE**]

REASONS WHY THERE IS LESS CONFIDENCE IN FEDERAL GOVT [N=4,345]

Nov 27-

Dec 10

2018

73	Gave an answer
27	Refused

Nov 27-	
Dec 10	
<u>2018</u>	
36	NET Government activity/inactivity
27	General government performance, corruption, role of money
9	Polarization/gridlock
14	NET Trump and Republicans
13	Trump's performance/behavior
1	Republicans performance
10	NET Problems with news media and information
5	News media bias/performance
3	More access to info and reporting on scandals and problems
1	Misinformation in general
1	Conservative bias in news
1	Liberal bias in ne
9	NET Social and policy problems
3	Inequality, problems of the poor
2	Broad cultural degradation
1	Tax and budget issues
1	Racism, issues tied to racial sensitivity
1	Immigration problems
1	Military issues, foreign affairs
1	Performance of schools/colleges
1	God, religion removed from public life
*	Health care, insurance
*	Climate, role of climate deniers
3	Technology, internet, social media
2	Performance of Democrats now and in the past
2	Scandals/problems from past like Watergate/Vietnam
1	Many reasons
1	General tone of politics and elections
3	Other
28	Refused/Don't Know

ASK IF R SAYS PEOPLE ARE LESS CONFIDENT IN GOVERNMENT LESS (INSTCONF1=2):

INSTCONF3 Which of the following comes closer to your view – even if neither is exactly right?
[RANDOMIZE]

BASED ON FORMS 1 AND 4 [N=5,267]

Nov 27-	
Dec 10	
<u>2018</u>	
76	NET People are less confident in the federal government
19	The federal government deserves more public confidence than it gets
57	The federal government does not deserve any more public confidence than it gets
1	No answer
24	NET People are more confident in the federal government/about the same/no answer

ASK IF FORM=1 OR FORM=4 [N=5,267]:

INSTCONF4 When you think about the amount of confidence Americans have in the federal government, do you think they have... **[RANDOMIZE ORDER 1-4 FOR HALF, 4-1 FOR OTHER HALF]**

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

13	Far too much confidence
22	Too much confidence
42	Too little confidence
20	Far too little confidence
3	No answer

ASK IF FORM=1 OR FORM=4 [N=5,267]:

ZEROSUM Which comes closer to your view – even if neither is exactly right? **[RANDOMIZE]**

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

42	It's possible to have economic policies that benefit everyone in the country
56	Pretty much any economic policy will end up benefitting some people at the expense of others
1	No answer

ASK IF FORM=1 OR FORM=4 [N=5,267]:

TRUSTCURE1 Do you think it is possible to improve the level of confidence Americans have in the federal government or is that not possible to do?

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

84	Yes, it is possible
15	No, it is not possible
1	No answer

ASK IF TRUSTCURE1=1:

TRUSTCURE2 What do you think would help improve Americans' confidence in the federal government? **[OPEN END]**

WHAT WOULD HELP IMPROVE AMERICANS' CONFIDENCE IN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT [N=4,652]

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

73	Gave an answer
27	Refused

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

23	NET Political reforms and changes
16	More transparency, less secrecy
4	Term limits
3	Curtail the role of money in politics
2	Conduct fair elections
1	Fix Constitution
*	End gerrymandering
*	Reduce partisanship
15	Improve political leadership and government performance
12	Work together in communities to solve problems
8	NET Fix/adopt policy changes to address ...
3	Tax and budget issues
2	Economic problems
1	Health care/insurance
1	Education
1	Welfare, entitlements
1	Immigration
1	Solving all the country's problems
*	Gun control
*	Housing
*	Climate/environment
*	Racism
*	Infrastructure
7	Get rid of/deal with Trump
4	Reform the news media
2	Bring corrupt leaders to justice
2	Keep promises
1	Change use of technology/internet/social media
1	Let Trump do his job
1	Rely more on facts
1	Stop Democrats from causing problems
1	Spiritual and religious changes can help
6	Other
30	Refused/Don't know

ASK IF FORM=1 OR FORM=4 [N=5,267]:

TRUSTIMPT1 How important would you say it is that the U.S. improve the level of confidence Americans have in the federal government?

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

68	Very important
25	Somewhat important
5	Not too important
2	No at all important
<1	No answer

RANDOMIZE ORDER OF BLOCKS AVOID1/AVOID2 AND BLOCKS AVOID3/4. ALWAYS SHOW AVOID1 BEFORE AVOID2 and AVOID3 BEFORE AVOID4. RECORD ORDER SHOWN

ASK IF FORM=1 OR FORM=4 [N=5,267]:

AVOID1 Which comes closer to your view – even if neither is exactly right? **[RANDOMIZE]**

Nov 27-

Dec 10

2018

61	The news media intentionally ignores some stories that are important to the public
38	The news media makes their best effort to cover the stories that are important to the public
1	No answer

ASK IF R BELIEVES THE NEWS MEDIA DOES NOT COVER STORIES (AVOID1=1):

AVOID2 What important news stories do you feel the news media ignores? **[OPEN END]**

THE ISSUES THE NEWS MEDIA IGNORES [N=3,110]

Nov 27-

Dec 10

2018

64	Gave an answer
36	Refused

Nov 27-

Dec 10

2018

19	General complaints about one-sided coverage performance
15	NET Domestic issues and policies
4	Crime and the justice system
4	Race-related issues
3	Immigration, border issues, "invasion"
3	Climate/environment issues
1	Poverty, hunger, homelessness
1	Guns
1	Stories related to religion
1	Coverage of average Americans
1	Abortion
11	NET Trump's accomplishments, good news about the economy
9	Trump's accomplishments
2	Good news about the economy
6	Good news in general
5	NET International news, national security stories
4	International news
1	Stories about wars in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan
4	Democrats problems, scandals
4	Democrats problems, scandals

2	General political corruption and influence of special interests
2	Many/all kinds of stories
2	Short, non-specific answers like "truth" or "the truth"
1	Trump's problems and scandals
*	Democrats' accomplishments
6	Other
38	Refused/Don't know

ASK IF FORM=1 OR FORM=4 [N=5,267]:

AVOID3 Which comes closer to your view – even if neither is exactly right? **[RANDOMIZE]**

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

69	The federal government intentionally withholds important information from the public that it could safely release
29	The federal government publicly releases the important information it can safely release
2	No answer

ASK IF R BELIEVES THE GOVT AVOIDS SHARING INFO (AVOID3=1):

AVOID4 What important information do you feel the federal government withholds? **[OPEN END]**

THE ISSUES ON WHICH THE GOVERNMENT WITHHOLDS IMPORTANT INFORMATION [N=3,609]

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

58	Gave an answer
42	Refused

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

16	NET Information about specific domestic-policy issues
7	Climate and environment
6	Budget, taxes, deficits
3	Medical, health, insurance issues
1	Immigration
1	Privacy and surveillance issues
1	Economic policy
1	Guns and violence
1	Policy impact assessments/analysis
*	Crime and police issues
*	Elections, vote tampering
14	NET Information about general government problems and scandals
8	Information that would embarrass the government, damage its reputation
5	Government corruption and waste
1	Secret decisions, backroom deals

9	NET Information about foreign policy and homeland security issues
4	International and foreign policy issues
4	Military matters, budgets
1	Threats tied to terrorism, homeland security, crime
5	Information about all, more than three issues
5	Information about Trump's tax returns, business dealings, his behavior
3	Information about conspiracies, historic events (e.g. JFK assassination, UFOs)
3	Information about FBI, Mueller, intelligence community investigations
2	Short, non-specific answers like "truth" or "the truth"
1	Information about Democratic scandals/problems
*	Information that would make Trump look good
5	Other
47	Refused/Don't know

ASK IF FORM=2 OR FORM=3 [N=5,351]:

TRUSTOTHERS When you first meet someone, do you typically... **[RANDOMIZE]**

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

46	Trust them right away until you have reason to doubt them
53	Not trust them until you get to know them better
1	No answer

ASK IF FORM=2 OR FORM=3 [N=5,351]:

PERSCONF1 Compared with 20 years ago, do you think Americans as a whole are... **[RANDOMIZE**
"More confident in each other" and "Less confident in each other", WITH
"About the same" ALWAYS LAST]

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

7	More confident in each other
71	Less confident in each other
22	About the same
<1	No answer

ASK IF R THINKS PEOPLE ARE LESS CONFIDENT IN EACH OTHER (PERSCONF1=2):

PERSCONF2 In your own words, what do you think are the most important reasons why Americans are less confident in each other than they were 20 years ago? **[OPEN END]**

THE REASONS WHY AMERICANS ARE LESS CONFIDENT IN EACH OTHER THAN THEY WERE 20 YEARS AGO [N=3,981]

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

78	Gave an answer
22	Refused
Nov 27- Dec 10 <u>2018</u>	
43	NET Societal and policy problems
14	People are more isolated, lonely, out for themselves
11	People are lazy, greedy, dishonest, untrustworthy; generational change plays a role
9	Crime, violence, drugs, scams, general fear
6	Racism, racially-sensitive issues, sexism
4	God, religion removed from public life, decline of morals
4	Inequality, problems of the poor
1	Immigration
1	Education, school performance problems
16	NET Government activity/inactivity
15	Polarization, gridlock
1	Government performance, problems, corruption
11	NET Problems with the news media and information
9	Bias and news media performance
1	Misinformation in general, abundance of information
1	Conservative bias in news
*	Liberal bias in news
4	Performance of Trump and Republicans
2	Performance of Democrats
1	Rise of extremism, hate
2	Other
24	Refused/Don't know

ASK IF R SAYS PEOPLE ARE LESS CONFIDENT EACH OTHER (PERSCONF1=2):

PERSCONF3 Which of the following comes closest to your view – even if neither is exactly right?
[RANDOMIZE]

BASED ON FORMS 2 AND 3 [N=5,351]

Nov 27- Dec 10 <u>2018</u>	
71	NET Americans are less confident in each other
49	Americans have lost confidence in each other because people are not as reliable as they used to be
21	Americans have lost confidence in each other even though people are as reliable as they have always been
1	No answer
29	NET Americans are more confident in each other/about the same/no answer

ASK IF FORM=2 OR FORM=3 [N=5,351]:

PERSCONF4 When you think about the amount of confidence Americans have in their fellow citizens, do you think they have... [**RANDOMIZE ORDER 1-4 FOR HALF, 4-1 FOR OTHER HALF**]

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

7	Far too much confidence
11	Too much confidence
55	Too little confidence
25	Far too little confidence
3	No answer

ASK IF FORM=2 OR FORM=3 [N=5,351]:

COOPERATE Which comes closer to your view – even if neither is exactly right? [**RANDOMIZE**]

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

24	People will not cooperate with one another even in a crisis if they don't trust each other
75	In a crisis, people will cooperate with each other even if they don't trust each other
1	No answer

RANDOMIZE STRAT1, STRAT2, STRAT3

ASK IF FORM=2 OR FORM=3 [N=5,351]:

STRAT1 In most situations, do you think it's better for people to... [**RANDOMIZE**]

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

50	Be trusting
49	Be skeptical
1	No answer

ASK IF FORM=2 OR FORM=3 [N=5,351]:

STRAT2 In most situations, do you think it's better for people to... [**RANDOMIZE**]

Nov 27-
Dec 10
2018

78	Be cautious
22	Take risks
1	No answer

ASK IF FORM=2 OR FORM=3 [N=5,351]:

STRAT3 In most situations, do you think it's better for people to... [**RANDOMIZE**]

Nov 27-
Dec 10

2018

29	Be self-reliant
71	Work together with others
1	No answer

ASK IF FORM=2 OR FORM=3 [N=5,351]:

TRUSTCURE3 Do you think it is possible to improve the level of confidence Americans have in each other or is that not possible to do?

Nov 27-

Dec 10

2018

86	Yes, it is possible
13	No, it is not possible
1	No answer

ASK IF R BELIEVES THERE ARE WAYS TO IMPROVE TRUST (TRUSTCURE3=1):

TRUSTCURE4 What do you think can be done that improve Americans' confidence in each other?
[OPEN END]

THE ISSUES THE NEWS MEDIA IGNORES [N=3,110]

Nov 27-

Dec 10

2018

72	Gave an answer
28	Refused

Nov 27-

Dec 10

2018

30	NET Changes in personal behavior
13	Be less partisan/tribal, respect others
11	Be kind and cooperate
6	Be more personally honest and trustworthy
10	Elect better, more inspiring leaders
8	NET Reform and reorient the news
6	End fake news, sensational, divisive coverage
2	Report more good news, stories about people solving problems
5	NET Fix/adopt policy changes to address problems with ...
2	Education
1	The political system/gerrymandering
1	Economy
1	Safety net problems
1	Crime
1	Literacy
*	Immigration
*	Drug addiction
*	Justice system
4	NET Embrace programs to improve human behavior relating to ...
1	Racism
1	Incivility

1	Identity politics
1	A lack of a belief in a unified America
*	Sexism
3	Impeach Trump, elect someone else
3	Embrace religious, moral solutions
1	Change the way people use technology/internet/social media
1	Less government, more personal responsibility
1	It will take a national crisis to restore trust
*	Democratic party/leaders are the problem
4	Other
33	Refused/Don't know

ASK IF FORM=2 OR FORM=3 [N=5,351]:

TRUSTIMPT2 How important would you say it is that the level of confidence Americans have in each other be improved?

Nov 27-

Dec 10

2018

58	Very important
35	Somewhat important
6	Not too important
1	Not at all important
1	No answer